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ARTICLE

LEIBNIZ AND KANT ON POSSIBILITY AND EXISTENCE

Ohad Nachtomy

This paper examines the Leibnizian background to Kant's critique of the ontological argument. I present Kant's claim that existence is not a real predicate, already formulated in his pre-critical essay of 1763, as a generalization of Leibniz's reasoning regarding the existence of created things. The first section studies Leibniz's equivocations on the notion of existence and shows that he employs two distinct notions of existence – one for God and another for created substances. The second section examines Kant's position in his early paper of 1763. My claim is that Kant's view of existence in 1763, namely that it is not a predicate, is strongly related to the logical notion of possibility, formulated by Leibniz and accepted by Kant.

KEYWORDS: possibility; existence; ontological argument; Leibniz; Kant

1. INTRODUCTION

According to a story often told in the history of modern philosophy courses, Kant was the first to show that existence is not a predicate. Kant thus refuted an assumption upon which the ontological argument for the existence of God depends, an argument presented by Anselm in the eleventh century and employed, among many others, by the masters of rationalism – Descartes, Spinoza and Leibniz. It is worth stressing that, in his refutation of the ontological argument, Kant was not making a marginal or a merely technical point. Rather, Kant's refutation of the ontological argument undermines rational theology's project to prove God's existence. Likewise, Kant's refutation of the ontological argument was perceived as most destructive, not only for traditional theology but also for the traditional world-view at large.¹ Furthermore, Kant's critique of the ontological argument marks a moment in which the notion of existence is separated

¹Heine spoke of Kant as the *Weltzermalmender*, 'the great destroyer in the kingdom of thought' (Heine, *Werke*, 5:98). See Allen W. Wood, *Kant's Rational Theology* (Ithaca, 1978), 16–7 and 97.

from that of essence. As Vilkkio and Hintikka (2006) remark, ‘if we examine what Kant meant, we can see that his claim was far stronger than what the slogan “existence is not a predicate” expresses. He argued that existence cannot even be a part of the force of a predicate term’ (367).

For all its significant consequences, Kant’s point seems surprisingly straightforward.² Existence, he says, does not add anything to the essence or to the concept of a given thing (A599/B626). Memorably, he writes that ‘the actual contains nothing more than the merely possible. A hundred actual dollars do not contain the least bit more than a hundred possible ones’ (A599/B627; CE 567). Thus, existence does not add anything to the content of a concept but only indicates that something is actual and not merely possible.³ In other words, in denying that existence adds something to the content of a concept (his negative thesis), Kant affirms (his positive thesis) that ascribing existence to something points to the thing’s modal status or position.

This view of existence has become entrenched in twentieth century philosophy as Frege and Russell assimilated it into a formal logic. Frege and Russell have formalized the notion of existence not as a predicate but rather through the usage of the existential quantifier. This has become the canonical way of formalizing and (as many following Quine believe) of also understanding the meaning of existence. Vilkkio and Hintikka put this point as follows: ‘after Kant, existence was left homeless. It found a new home in the algebra of logic (. . .). The orphaned notion of existence has found a new home in the existential quantifier’.⁴

What is much less known is that, more than a century before Kant, Leibniz already articulated a similar notion of existence.⁵ For example, Leibniz notes that ‘existence’ does not add anything to a concept of an individual, which, according to him, is already complete as a candidate for actualization. In his correspondence with Arnauld, Leibniz states that individuals are already found fully formed (*toute formée*) as possibilities, i.e. as complete concepts in God’s mind, so that nothing could be added to their concepts (DM 13, and correspondence with Arnauld). Such complete concepts include all the would-be activities and properties of individuals – past, present and future – as predicates in the concepts that God conceives in his understanding and considers for actualization. What God considers for actualization (i.e. whether to create or not) are complete concepts whose

²It is perhaps for this reason that, despite its enormous consequences, Kant hardly feels the need to argue for it in the first *Critique*. I am not claiming that Kant’s argument is flawless. It is worth noting that many philosophers remain unconvinced. For example, see Graham Oppy’s *Ontological Arguments* (Cambridge, 1995).

³(CPR, A599/B627).

⁴For further discussion, see Risto Vilkkio and Jaakko Hintikka, ‘Existence and Predication from Aristotle to Frege’, *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research*, LXXIII (2006) No. 2: 359.

⁵Cf. H. Ishiguro, *Leibniz’s Philosophy of Logic and Language* (Cambridge, 1990), 192.

content is fully specified prior to their creation.⁶ It seems quite clear that, in this context, existence is not included in the concepts of individuals themselves, seen as *per se* possibilities (that is, independently of the compossibility relations, which make up for possible worlds).⁷

In some places, Leibniz even argues that the conception of existence as a predicate can be reduced *ad absurdum*:

if existence were anything other than what is demanded by essence (*essentiae exigentia*), it would follow that it itself would have a certain essence, or would add something new to things, concerning which it might be asked, whether this essence exists, and why it and not another.

(A 6.4 1443; GP VII 195. See also A 6.4 762–3)

If existence were to be one of the essential predicates of the complete concept of each individual, God's choice to create the best possible world would be redundant. For, in that case, creation would seem to be a direct logical consequence of these concepts. Likewise, Leibniz's central thesis that the actual world is contingent on God's choice to create *it*, rather than another possible world, would be vacuous.

Indeed, with respect to the concepts of created things, Leibniz doubted that existence could be seen as one of the predicates forming the individual's essence. Rather, existence, he says, is what is demanded by the individual's essence (more on this below). If a given essence has a certain claim for existence, so that it can exist, but also can *not* exist, 'existence' is clearly not one of its essential predicates.

Leibniz, however, did not generalize this view. He made a very significant exception. According to Leibniz, there is a unique and necessary being whose essence does include existence as one of its essential attributes or perfections, namely, God. In many texts, especially early ones, Leibniz argues that God is the most perfect being whose essence includes existence as one of his perfections.⁸

I will argue below that Leibniz's approach to the question of existence is closely related to his view of possibility. It is well known that Leibniz developed a conception of possibility in which the traditional notion of essence is understood in terms of conceptual self-consistency. More precisely, for Leibniz, conceptual self-consistency serves not merely as a

⁶God did not choose to create an 'Adam vague' (LR 87), that is, an indefinite notion of Adam which entails only general characteristics (conceived *sub ratione generalitatis*). Rather, God chose to create a specified and well-defined notion of Adam. Leibniz writes that, 'the nature of an individual ['which he finds completely formed in his understanding' (LR 109)] must be complete and determined' (LR 108).

⁷It is arguable that 'being chosen by God' or 'being part of the best possible world' or 'being such that God will choose to actualize it' would be included in the Leibnizian concept of an individual. In this case, something that would lead to existence might be included in the concepts of these individuals. I develop this option in the next and last sections.

⁸For example, A 6.4 18–9, (1677); A 2.1 390–3, (1678); G IV 405–6, (1701).

necessary condition for possibility but also as a sufficient condition for possibility. Leibniz goes as far as arguing that even the essence of God must be shown to be possible (i.e. to be self-consistent). He nevertheless adheres to the traditional view according to which existence belongs to God essentially, so that essence and existence are inseparable in God alone.

Leibniz's adherence to this privileged status of God's existence has led Russell to observe that Leibniz equivocates on the notion of existence, namely, claiming that it is a predicate in the case of God (which he sees as a necessary being) but not as a predicate in the case of creatures (which he sees as contingent beings).⁹ Russell was right on this score. While Russell sees this equivocation as pointing to an inconsistency in Leibniz, I will use Russell's observation here for exposing one of Leibniz's deep metaphysical commitments, showing why he was not prepared to generalize this point, and why Kant was.¹⁰ This will help in explicating Leibniz's reasons for distinguishing between two notions of existence, which correspond to two kinds of substances – created and non-created ones. While my aim in this work is not to defend Leibniz, I will show that his equivocal notion of existence amounts to a systematic, and well-motivated distinction between the kind of existence he ascribes to the necessary being, on the one hand, and the kind of existence he ascribes to contingent (created) things, on the other.

If so, Kant's view that existence is not a predicate is better seen as a generalization of Leibniz's line of reasoning regarding created things (extending it to the concept of God) rather than as a novel point. The story, however, is far more complicated and its telling requires some complex historical and philosophical context. This paper attempts to make a modest contribution to the reconstruction of this complex context. I stress that it is modest because there is much that this paper leaves out. I do not address in any detail the question of Leibniz's actual influence on Kant. In particular, I disregard almost entirely the details of the complex way in which Kant received Leibniz's views,¹¹ as well as other important sources for Kant's views on existence and possibility, such as Wolff, Baumgarten and Crusius.

In addition, the main focus of this paper is Kant's views up to 1763. As will become apparent, I am focusing here on a significant philosophical change in the relations between the notions of existence and possibility in Leibniz and Kant. The fragment of the story I tell here begins with Leibniz's formulation of a strictly logical notion of possibility and ends in 1763 with

⁹Bertrand Russell, *A Critical Exposition of the Philosophy of Leibniz* (London, 1937), 185.

¹⁰Leibniz's equivocation might be partially explained by reference to the development of his views (so that the view of existence as a predicate is more evident in the early period (roughly up to the later 1670s)). This line of interpretation has been suggested by Robert M. Adams, *Leibniz: Determinist, Theist, Idealist* (New York, 1994) and followed recently with more details on Leibniz's development by Mogens Laerke, *Leibniz lecteur de Spinoza. La genèse d'une opposition complexe* (Paris, 2008), sect. III, 2.3. I address this suggestion in the next section.

¹¹In particular, I do not treat the important and complicated question of how distinct were Leibniz's views from the way in which Wolff has understood and presented them.

Kant's statement that existence is not a predicate. There is a most interesting sequel to the story that deals with Kant's transition to the *Critique of Pure Reason*. But this story will have to be told elsewhere.

The next section presents Leibniz's twofold notion of existence. The third section considers Kant's pre-critical paper of 1763 and argues that Kant's view of existence, namely that it is not a predicate is strongly related to Leibniz's view of logical possibility. The fourth section examines the tension between Leibniz's view of existence and his theory of truth. I conclude with a rough sketch of the relations between possibility and existence in Leibniz and Kant.

2. LEIBNIZ'S TWOFOLD NOTION OF EXISTENCE

In his early (1676) proof for God's existence, Leibniz employs two distinct notions of existence: one that he considers a predicate and applicable only to God, and another that is not a predicate and applicable to all created and contingent things.¹² In at least one distinct set of texts, Leibniz considers existence to be a perfection, namely, in his modified version of Anselm's proof, formulated in his famous notes 'That the Most Perfect Being is Possible' (A 6.3 575–80) and 'That the Most Perfect Being Exists'. According to Leibniz, the validity of Anselm's argument (as revived by Descartes) depends on showing that the notion of the most perfect being is consistent. As he writes,

there is given, or, there can be understood, a being which is the subject of all perfections, or a most perfect being. Hence, it is at once evident that it exists; for existence is contained among perfections (*cum et existentia inter perfectiones contineatur*).

(A 6.3 577; Pk 101)

According to Leibniz in these notes, if the concept of the *Ens Perfectissimum* is shown to be possible, one would immediately see that such a being necessarily exists because existence (seen as a predicate, perfection, or an attribute) necessarily belongs to its essence. In these texts, Leibniz defines '*Ens Perfectissimum*' as the subject of all perfections or of all absolute positive attributes. As Fichant pointed out, the compatibility among perfections here means 'the possibility of the *in esse* of different predicates in the same subject' (Fichant, 1998, 111). Once this definition is shown to be consistent, the proof proceeds on the familiar Anselmian and

¹²This point is controversial. For example, Mark Fisher and Eric Watkins, 'Kant on the Material Ground of Possibility: From *The Only Possible Argument* to the *Critique of Pure Reason*', *The Review of Metaphysics*, 52 (1998) No. 2: 369–95, play down Leibniz's other sense of existence.

Cartesian assumption that existence is a perfection and thus would be included in the unique subject that contains all perfections.¹³

Leibniz also defines God as ‘a being from whose possibility (or from whose essence) his existence follows’ (A 6.3 582). Leibniz’s proof clearly works on the assumption that existence is included in God’s concept and is an essential attribute of God. In other words, Leibniz’s adherence to the validity of this argument shows that he presupposes that existence is a constitutive predicate of the concept of the most perfect being.¹⁴ As he writes,

Again, a necessary being is the same as a being from whose essence existence follows. For a necessary being is one which necessarily exists, such that for it not to exist would imply a contradiction, and so would conflict with the concept or essence of this being. And so existence belongs to its concept or essence.

(A 6.3 583)

Leibniz was quite proud of his ‘possibility proof’ in 1676. He showed it to Spinoza and noted with evident pride that, after some explanation, Spinoza had approved of it (A 579). As far as we know, Leibniz never renounced this version of his argument. He mentions his original contribution to this proof throughout his career and hardly misses an opportunity to attack the Cartesians for adhering to a non-valid form of it.¹⁵

Leibniz’s demand that the notion of God be shown to be consistent as a precondition for establishing God’s existence can be seen as part of his more general approach regarding the relation between possibility and existence. For Leibniz, existence claims presuppose possibility or consistency claims. According to Leibniz, that something *can* exist is logically prior to whether it in fact exists. To show that something is possible requires showing that its concept is consistent. This is the point of giving a real definition – a definition establishing the consistency of a given concept.

Yet, as Russell (1937) noted, and as Adams (1994) has studied in detail, Leibniz’s position regarding existence was more complex and nuanced. In addition to thinking of existence as one of God’s perfections, Leibniz also employs a different notion of existence. This is already apparent in the same texts from the same years (the so-called Paris years of 1672–1676). For example, in the *De Arcanis Sublimium Vel De Summa Rerum*, from February

¹³For a critique of this argument, see Laerke, *Leibniz lecteur de Spinoza. La genèse d’une opposition complexe*, sect. IV, 6.2.

¹⁴For this reason, it is misguided to play down Leibniz’s view of existence as a perfection, as J. J.-B. Vilmer, ‘L’existence leibnizienne’, *Archives de Philosophie*, 70 (2007): 255 does. Vilmer, states emphatically against Russell and Mates that ‘l’existence pour Leibniz n’est pas une perfection’, Vilmer, ‘L’existence leibnizienne’, 255. Since Leibniz makes it explicit that he amends and modifies Descartes’s proof by showing that the notion of a most perfect being is consistent, this judgement seems to be off the mark.

¹⁵To mention a few notable examples: Letter to Countess Elizabeth, 1678, AG 240; *Meditations on Knowledge, Truth, and Ideas* of 1684 (AG 25–6).

1676, Leibniz writes: ‘to exist is nothing other than to be harmonious (*Existere nihil aliud esse quam Harmonicum esse*)’ (A 6.3, 474; Pk 24–5). In the *De Existentia* from late 1676 Leibniz notes: ‘[. . .] 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*)’.¹⁶ In 1678, Leibniz defines existence as that which is ‘compossible with the most perfect’.¹⁷ Leibniz also claims that ‘[e]xistent is the series that involves more of reality’ (Grua 325; Adams, 1994, 165).¹⁸ The notion of existence sketched in these passages is obviously complex and different from being a simple perfection or predicate. Among other things, it clearly implies that, in this context, existence is seen as a certain *relation* among possible things – the most harmonious set, the best, the most perfect, the one with the most reality. Existence in this sense is a relation that involves compossibility and the highest perfection among a subset of possible things, which God perceives.

Such a relation arises, in Leibniz’s metaphysics, as God conceives and compares all possibilities as candidates for creation.¹⁹ In this context, the existence of creatures *presupposes* God’s existence as the perceiver of all possible individuals and their relations. As Leibniz notes explicitly (between 1675 and 1676):

I seem to have discovered that to Exist is nothing other that to be sensed – to be sensed however, if not by us, then at least by the Author of things, to be sensed by whom is nothing other than to please him or to be Harmonious.

(A 6.3 56)

It seems clear that Leibniz’s conception of existence here is richer than simply being part of the essence of a thing. In *Existentia. An sit perfectio* of 1677, Leibniz states flatly that existence is not a perfection: ‘In effect, it is true that that which exists is more perfect than the non-existing, but it is not true that existence itself is a perfection, for it is nothing but a certain comparison between perfections [*perfectionem inter se comparatio*]’ (A 6.4, 1354).²⁰ According to Leibniz here, existence is not itself a perfection but (what results from) a comparison among perfections. In other words, existence is a specific relation among individual perfections, viz., the one that picks the best or the most harmonious set.

Adams has argued convincingly that this latter definition of existence should be understood in Leibniz’s sense of a real definition, that is, as an explication of the nature of existence, so that it would ‘exhibit the reason or

¹⁶A 6.3, 588; Pk 30.

¹⁷See also A 6.4 867.

¹⁸See also A 6.4 2770.

¹⁹See Mugnai (1990) and B. Mates, *The Philosophy of Leibniz: Metaphysics and Language* (New York, 1986), Chapter 3. Ohad Nachtomy, *Possibility, Agency, and Individuality in Leibniz’s Metaphysics*, Springer (Dordrecht, 2007).

²⁰Cf. A 6.4, 1445.

cause that an existence would have' (Adams, 1994, 168).²¹ Such an explication would run along these lines: the existing set of possible things was perceived by God to be the most perfect and harmonious and therefore was selected for actualization. In this sense, this definition gives the reason or cause for the existence of created things and the world. We must not overlook the role of God as 'the reason or cause that an existence would have' here. As Leibniz would write later: 'If there were no necessary being, there would be no contingent being either. For a reason must be provided why contingents should exist rather than not exist' (A 6.4 1617).

No matter how exactly we construe this second notion of existence, it clearly presupposes God's existence. If 'to Exist is nothing other than to be sensed (...) not by us, [but] by the Author of things', then God's existence clearly figures in this definition of existence. Since God's existence is presupposed here, it is very clear that this notion of existence does not apply to God's existence but only to the existence of created things. Thus, it would seem that Leibniz's metaphysics requires two senses of existence: one applicable to created and contingent things and another applicable to their Creator.

If Leibniz was using 'existence' in these two senses, it would clarify why he does not apply this relational notion of existence to God. This would also explain how Leibniz could handle the dilemma Russell poses for him. Russell argued that, if existence is seen as a predicate, Leibniz's theory of creation has to be given up (for then the actual world would exist by definition and there would be no need for an act of creation); but if existence is not a predicate, the ontological argument would have to be given up: 'either creation is self-contradictory, or, if existence is not a predicate, the ontological argument is unsound' (Russell, 1937, 185).

Leibniz avoids the dilemma by using two different senses of existence, as spelled out above.²² This approach implies that existence is not said of God in the same way as it is said of his creatures. I do not see a compelling reason to think that such a dual sense of existence would be unwelcome by Leibniz.²³ The gap between the Creator and his creatures would seem substantive enough to permit a systematic distinction in the application of the notion of existence. To a large extent, the distinction between the eternal

²¹It is worth noting that Leibniz develops his notion of real definition in the very context of proving that the notion of '*Ens Perfectissimum*' is possible.

²²Except for the existence of God alone, all existences are contingent. Moreover, the reason [*causa*] why some particular contingent things exists, rather than others, should be sought not in its definition alone, but in a comparison with other things. For, since there are an infinity of possible things which nevertheless, do not exist, the reason [*ratio*] why these exist rather than those should not be sought in their definition (for then nonexistence would imply a contradiction, and those others would not be possible, contrary to our hypothesis) but from an extrinsic source, namely, from the fact that the ones that do exist are more perfect than others'. (AG 19. See also 20.)

²³Cf. the opening lines of *On Contingency* (circa 1986), Grua 302, AG 28.

and necessary existence of the Creator and the temporal, contingent and dependent existence of creatures is part of a theological tradition that ranges from Augustine to Descartes. The most significant change that takes place in Leibniz is not so much his dual sense of existence but rather his employment of the notion of possibility and his view of the existence of creatures as the actualization of purely logical possibilities. It is likewise this point about existence that is generalized by Kant.

We know that Leibniz was dissatisfied with the traditional formulation of the ontological argument and sought to support it with an *a priori* proof that the most perfect being is possible. In 1676, he was convinced that he could provide such a proof but it is not so clear how long his conviction lasts. As Adams notes, after 1678, the *a priori* possibility proof of God's existence no longer surfaces in Leibniz's texts and what becomes more prominent is a presumption in favour of the possibility of the *Ens Perfectissimum*. Leibniz's idea is that the notion of the most perfect being should be presumed possible unless shown to be impossible.²⁴ Thus, it is arguable that Leibniz himself becomes hesitant about his early *a priori* possibility proof and perhaps likewise about seeing existence as a predicate (even when applied to God).

Laerke has recently argued that during his correspondence with Eckhardt in 1677, Leibniz abandons his notion of existence as a perfection and replaces it with the notion of perfection as a degree of reality.²⁵ However, I do not think that we have compelling evidence to support the claim that Leibniz abandoned the notion of existence as a perfection, although it clearly becomes less prominent in texts written after 1677. The notion of existence as a perfection seems to remain intact when applied to God and to coexist with the notion of existence as a degree of perfection.

In any case, it is certain that Leibniz's theory of creation never disappears but rather persists throughout his career. Thus, if, as Russell argues, something has to be given up by Leibniz, the texts strongly suggest that it would be the *a priori* proof for God's existence in favour of a presumption that God is possible rather than his theory of creation. I suggest that Leibniz in fact holds on to both positions by systematically using two notions of existence – one sense applicable to the Creator, and another applicable to creatures. I am not convinced that he ever abandoned this attitude.

By way of recapitulation, let us note that Leibniz clearly articulates the idea that existence does not add anything to a given individual essence. Likewise, the idea that existence is not a predicate is applicable to created

²⁴Leibniz derives this point as a variant on the proof of God's existence from the eternal truths. See M. R. Antognazza, 'Arguments for the Existence of God: The Continental European Debate', in *The Cambridge History of Eighteenth-Century Philosophy*, edited by K. Haakonssen (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006) 736.

²⁵Laerke refers to A 2.1, 327, note 8; 329, note 3; A 2.1, 363. However, for a clear statement that Leibniz sees existence as a perfection even later, see the *Meditationes de Cognitione, Veritate et Ideis* of 1684 GP IV 449; AG 25–6; *Monadology* § 45.

things but not to God. In addition, Leibniz holds that possibility – defined as self-consistency among terms – presupposes something actual, namely, God. Leibniz conceives of God as the mind who thinks all possibilities and whose attributes constitute an actual ground for thinking possibilities.

For Leibniz, the notion of God as the grounds for all possibilities occupies a unique and indispensable place. As he puts this in the *Monadologie* 45, ‘God alone (or the necessary Being) has this privilege that it must exist, if it is possible’.²⁶ This is what Leibniz calls the ‘pinnacle of modal theory’.²⁷ The result is that God’s existence, as the mind comprehending all possibilities, is presupposed (to be actual) in Leibniz’s view of possibility.²⁸ Interestingly, Kant takes up a very similar position in an early essay from 1763, to which I now turn.

3. KANT ON ‘THE ONLY POSSIBLE ARGUMENT IN SUPPORT OF A DEMONSTRATION OF THE EXISTENCE OF GOD’

Kant begins this essay with a very clear statement that ‘existence is not a predicate or a determination of a thing’ (2:72; CE 117). Kant’s famous point of 1781 is clearly articulated and put in general form in 1763.²⁹ It is even more interesting for my purposes here to note that Kant justifies his claim on the following grounds:

Take any subject you please, for example, Julius Caesar. Draw up a list of all the predicates which may be thought to belong to him, not excepting even those of space and time. You will quickly see that he can either exist with all these determinations, or not exist at all. The Being who gave existence to the world and to our hero within that world could know every single one of these predicates without exception, and yet still be able to regard him as a merely possible thing which, in the absence of that Being’s decision to create him, would not exist (...) who can deny that in the representation which the Supreme Being has of them [all these predicates] there is not a single determination missing, although existence is not among them, for the Supreme Being cognises them only as possible things. It cannot happen, therefore, that if they were to exist they would contain an extra predicate; for, in the case of possibility of a thing in its complete determination, no predicate at all can be missing. And if it had pleased God to create a different series of things, to create a different world, that world would have existed with all the

²⁶*Monadologie* § 44.

²⁷A 6.3 583. See also *Theodicy* §184. As we shall see, for Kant in 1763, the notion of possibility presupposes a necessary being.

²⁸For a substantiation of these claims, see Author’s book, chapters 1 and 2 as well as Robert M. Adams, ‘God, Possibility, and Kant’, *Faith and Philosophy*, 17 (2000) No. 4: 425–41.

²⁹There is, however, at least a subtle terminological difference between these texts. While in 1763 the term he is using is (*Existenz* or *Dasein*), in 1781, it is not ‘existence’ but ‘being’ (*Sein*) that Kant uses in 1763. I am not sure, however, what to make of this change.

determinations, and no additional ones, which He cognises it to have, although that world was merely possible.

(2:72; CE 117–8)

The Leibnizian echoes of this passage are quite striking. In fact, I suspect that most readers who did not know the author of this passage would probably attribute it to Leibniz rather than Kant. The idea that a subject is associated with an individual (a possible one in this case); the choice of the example, namely, Caesar (which appears in the *Theodicy* as well as the *Discours de métaphysique*, article 13); and that Caesar has a complete, fully determining concept, which is considered for creation as a mere possibility in ‘the representation which the Supreme Being has of them’, as part of a series of things (a world), are all very familiar Leibnizian themes.

Leibniz’s theory of the individual’s complete concept as the way of conceiving possible individuals, and God as realizing such possibilities, are clearly an important part of the background for Kant’s discussion here. In Section 3, Kant asks whether one can say that existence contains more than the possible. He responds: ‘no more is posited in a real thing than in a merely possible thing, for all the determinations and predicates of the real thing are also to be found in the mere possibility of that same thing’ (2:75; CE 121). He goes on to say: ‘I maintain that nothing more is posited in an existing thing than is posited in a merely possible thing’ (2:75; CE 121). This is the ground for Kant’s claim that existence is not a predicate. Instead of a predicate, Kant argues that existence is ‘the absolute positing of a thing’ (2:73; CE 119). As he clarifies, the claim that ‘X exists’ does not express a relation between a subject (X) and a predicate (existence) but the (modal) position of a complete set of predicates included in the subject. Although this view is almost identical to the one presented in the first Critique, what I would like to highlight here is the similarity between Kant’s view in this essay and Leibniz’s conceptualization of the relation between possibilities and the existence of created things.

The relation between Kant’s view of existence and the logical (or internal) view of possibility becomes even more explicit in the second Reflection. With the view of existence just presented, Kant attempts to show that the notion of internal possibility (i.e. one that does not involve a contradiction) presupposes something existing. In analyzing the internal notion of possibility, he draws a distinction between formal and material elements of internal impossibility:

... in every possibility we must first distinguish the something which is thought, and then we must distinguish the agreement of what is thought in it with the law of contradiction. A triangle which has a right angle is in itself possible. The triangle and the right angle are the data or the material element in this possible thing. The agreement, however, of the one with the other, in accordance with the law of contradiction, is the formal element in possibility.

(2:77; CE 123)

It is worth noting that, on this view, even an impossibility presupposes that some things are being contradicted. As Kant further writes, ‘A quadrangular triangle is absolutely impossible. Nonetheless, the triangle is something, and so is the quadrangle’ (2:77; CE 123). Kant’s intuition here is that possibility and impossibility presuppose the things whose conjunction is either compatible or not. In both cases, the matter is given and presupposed: any contradiction presupposes some *things* that are being contradicted. Conversely, any possibility presupposes some *things* that are not contradicted or are in agreement with one another.

If a contradiction is a relation of opposition between two things, it clearly presupposes these things, namely, the relata. Thus, any possibility defined by the principle of contradiction requires things that are not merely possible but in this sense actual. In the third Reflection, Section 2, entitled ‘There exists an absolutely necessary being’ Kant says: ‘All possibility presupposes something actual in and through which all that can be thought is given. Accordingly, there is a certain reality, the cancellation of which would itself cancel all internal possibility whatever’ (2:83; CE 127). This interesting result also provides clear evidence for Kant’s adherence to the definition of possibility according to the principle of non-contradiction. Kant goes on to claim that an actual foundation of all possibility is necessary: ‘it is apparent that the existence of one or more things itself lies at the foundation of all possibility, and that this existence is necessary in itself’ (2:83; CE 127).³⁰ In subsequent sections, Kant argues that such a necessary existence is unique, simple, immutable and eternal, contains supreme reality, and a mind – in short, it is something that corresponds to all the traditional attributes of God.

This satisfies Kant’s declared aim here to show that such an argument provides the *a priori* grounds for a proof that a necessary being exists:

The argument for the existence of God which we are presenting is based simply on the fact that something is possible ... It is, indeed, an argument derived from the internal characteristic mark of absolute necessity.

(2:91; CE 134–5)

Whatever subtleties and difficulties Kant’s reasoning in this essay may involve, the main line of argument is rather clear. The very notion of internal possibility, defined in terms of logical consistency, implies some necessary being, which Kant identifies with God. In short, the possible implies something actual, which he identifies with a necessary being, which is considered to be the ground for all possibility.

What I would like to highlight is that Kant’s main point here is very reminiscent of Leibniz’s reasoning leading to the conclusion that God is the foundation not only of all reality but of all possibility as well. Leibniz’s

³⁰Kant defines a necessary being (along with the tradition) as that the contrary of which implies a contradiction.

intuition can be formulated concisely thus: the notion of logical (*per se*) possibility is defined in terms of consistent thinkability and presupposes a thinking agent and some necessary elements as the foundation of what can be thought. Early and late in his career Leibniz identifies the thinking agent with God and the simple elements with his attributes.³¹

Unlike Leibniz, Kant does not proceed from the possibility of an *Ens Perfectissimum* to its existence but rather from the notion of possibility in general to that of an actual being. This is a subtle difference between their approaches. Leibniz argues that, if the notion of a most perfect being is possible, a most perfect being necessarily exists. Kant argues that the very notion of possibility implies a necessary being. This difference, while not negligible, only highlights the similarity in Leibniz and Kant's lines of argumentation. This similarity is nicely captured in Leibniz's phrase '... nisi ... Deus existeret, nihil possibile foret' – in a rough translation, 'unless God existed, nothing would be possible' (GP VI 440).³²

4. LEIBNIZ'S THEORY OF TRUTH AND THE CONSISTENCY OF HIS VIEW

I have argued above that Leibniz employs two notions of existence: one as a predicate, included in the concept of the most perfect being; and one as a relation among the set of compossible individuals, namely, the most harmonious or the most perfect or the best among them. In this latter sense, existence does not add content to the complete concept of an individual, seen as a mere possibility; rather, existence indicates that the concept with all its predicates is actual rather than a mere possibility or a mere thought in God's mind.

I have also suggested that Kant's view can be seen as a generalized and modified version of this second sense of existence, extending it to the notion of God.³³ What I would like to examine now is a serious objection to my reading of Leibniz that has been lurking in the background all along.

Leibniz famously held that, in every true proposition, the concept of the predicate is included in that of the subject, so that one could (at least in

³¹For details, see the author's book, chapter 1. I suppose that this line of reasoning can be identified with Leibniz's proof of God's existence from the eternal truths (at least in the way, it is presented in the *Monadologie* 43, *Theodicy* sec. 20, *New Essays* 4.9.14; GP V 429).

³²GP VI 440. Leibniz's dictum is also echoed in his *Theodicy* § 184: 'Sans Dieu, non seulement il n'y auroit rien d'existant mais, il n'y auroit rien de possible'. 'Without God, not only would there be nothing existing but nothing would be possible either'. For the method of citation, see note at the end of the paper.

³³This, however, does not prevent Kant (in the critical period) from retaining a notion of an *ens realissimum* consisting of all positive attributes, seen as an *idea* of reason which is required as a ground for all possibilities. See A. Chignell, 'Kant, Modality, and the Most Real Being', *Archiv fuer Geschichte der Philosophie*, 91 (2009) No. 2: 157–92, on this point.

principle) deduce from the complete concept of an individual all its predicates – past, present and future. Leibniz connects his *in esse* theory of truth with his view that each individual is defined by a complete concept that entails all its predicates. In explaining the notion of an individual substance (in the *Discourse on Metaphysics*, article 8), Leibniz writes:

... the subject term must always contain the predicate term, so that one who understands perfectly the notion of the subject would also know that the predicate belongs to it.

Since this is so, we can say that the nature of an individual substance of a complete being is to have a notion so complete that it is sufficient to contain and to allow us to deduce from it all the predicates of the subject to which this notion is attributed.

(AG 40–1)

According to this view of truth and Leibniz's view of the complete concept, it would seem that, in a statement such as 'Alexander exists', 'existence' would be included in the concept of the subject (Alexander) as one of its predicates. Since Alexander exists, the statement 'Alexander exists' is true and so (it would seem that) the notion of existence has to be included in Alexander's complete concept as one of its essential predicates, i.e. one of the predicates that define Alexander's unique individuality and identity. Thus, according to Leibniz's views of truth and predication, it seems that existence, both of God and of created individuals, is regarded as a predicate. This however, runs against what I argued above, namely that, in the contexts of created individuals, Leibniz does not see existence as a predicate.

How does Leibniz handle this discrepancy between his theory of truth and his notion of existence in the context of created individuals? In his correspondence with Arnauld (1676–1677), immediately after Leibniz composes the *Discourse on Metaphysics*, we find Arnauld pressing Leibniz on a closely related question. Leibniz's response, while extremely interesting and helpful on this issue, is not as transparent as one would hope.

In attempting to clarify his position, Leibniz relates the difference between the notion of an individual substance and that of a species (*espèces*) to the distinction between God's will and His understanding. In effect, Leibniz makes the very intriguing claim that the individual notions of substances involve God's free decrees:

The specific and most abstract notions involve only necessary or eternal truths, which do not at all depend on the divine decrees (whatever the Cartesians would say ...); but the individual notions of substances, which are complete and capable of distinguishing their subject, and which consequently involve contingent truths or truths of fact, and the particular circumstances of time, place, and others, must also involve (*enveloppe*) in their notion, taken as possible, the free decrees of God, also taken as possible, because the free

decrees of God are the main sources of existent things or facts, rather than essences, which are in the divine understanding before being considered by [God's] will.

(Le Roy 115)

The most interesting aspect of this complex reasoning for my concerns here is that, according to Leibniz here, God's free decrees somehow figure in the complete concepts of individuals, which otherwise belong to the domain of God's understanding. This statement seems at odds with a demarcation Leibniz is otherwise very keen to draw, namely, the demarcation between the scope of the principle of contradiction, which Leibniz usually attributes to the divine understanding and that of the principle of sufficient reason, which he usually regards as the domain of God's will. We would expect Leibniz to argue that possibilities belong to the realm of divine understanding and are governed by the principle of contradiction, and thus to belong to the realm of the purely logical, while the choice *which* logical possibility to actualize would require God's will, according to the principle of sufficient reason, and thus would involve moral considerations as well. Yet, in this passage, Leibniz is saying that God's free decisions (regarding which individuals) to create somehow enter into the very notions of these individuals (taken as possible). And indeed, just a few lines below, Leibniz says explicitly that 'the free decrees of God, *taken as possible*, enter into the notion of a possible Adam, [and] these very decrees, having become actual, are the cause of the actual Adam [*devenus actuels étant cause de l'Adam actuel*]' (my italics).

This passage suggests that God's free decrees, which are 'the main source for the existence of things', figure in Adam's complete concept, seen as a possible individual. While very puzzling, this view is clearly not a slip of a pen on Leibniz's part. This text is a polished version of a long earlier draft. In addition, Leibniz goes on to clarify his position as follows:

I agree with you against the Cartesians that possibilities are possible in advance of the actual decrees of God but not without supposing sometimes these same decrees, taken as possible. For the possibility of individuals or of contingent truths include (*enferment*) in their notion the possibility of their cause, namely, God's free decrees, in which they differ from the eternal truths or the possibility of species, which only depend on God's understanding without presupposing the will, as I already explained.

(116)

In spite of Leibniz's efforts at demarcation elsewhere, it seems that the roles of God's understanding and God's will get mixed up here. An *important* hint in clarifying Leibniz's puzzling position here is the phrase '*pris comme possible*'. Consider a complete concept of a merely possible individual, one that God chose not to create. Call it Harry Potter. Clearly

the concept of Harry Potter does not include the concept of existence, since Harry Potter does not exist. The complete concept of Harry Potter, however, does include the possibility of existing in the sense that it was possible that God would decide to create him. The realization of this possibility (Harry Potter) depends on God's free decrees. The free decrees of God are related to the complete concepts of individuals so that these individuals either merit actualization or not. This merit is considered in connection with the set that makes up the best or the most harmonious world. Yet, this merit, which derives from the nature or essence of the individuals, requires God's judgement and free will to realize them. As it turns out, Adam and Alexander's complete concepts merit actualization but Harry Potter's does not. It is precisely this merit, I suggest, that may be said to include or refer to the possible decrees of God. This is the case because it is due to the merit or the nature of the individuals that they are or are not chosen by God for actualization. If the merit of a concept to be created is higher, the reasons for God to create it are stronger. Yet, God's decision, Leibniz stresses, is contingent on God's will; it is not necessitated by the concept's (and the world to which it belongs) merit alone. According to Leibniz, it remains logically (if not morally) possible for God to create the second best rather than the best world.

In the end, the view Leibniz expresses here seems very similar to his view that each essence or possibility has a claim (exigency) to existence in proportion to its merit – i.e. its contribution to the best or most harmonious world. In this sense, one can say that the complete concept of an individual includes the information that would lead God to select it for creation. In this sense, the free decrees of God can be seen as included in the chosen concepts prior to God's decision to create them.

Note, however, that this reasoning works only with the qualification that both the individuals and God's free decrees are taken *as possible*. After all, only an actual decree of God can render a complete concept, which is a mere possibility, actual. Possible things have no power to realize themselves.³⁴ For this reason, God's free decrees are not *actually* contained in the concept of Harry Potter. But the free decrees of God are likewise not *actually* contained in the concept of Alexander before God chose to create it (with the rest of the individuals belonging to our world). Thus, strictly speaking, 'existence' is not included as an essential predicate in Alexander's complete concept, when taken as a possible. Existence may be said to be included in Alexander's complete concept in the sense that God ought to (and therefore would) create it, due to its merits, relative to others.

This does not mean that God must create it. As I noted, I think that this is a different way of stating the thesis that each possible individual has a claim to existence, in proportion to its merit to exist. In this sense, the concept of Harry Potter also has a certain exigency to exist, only it turns out to be

³⁴See, for example, Grua 286: '(... les choses possibles, n'ayant point d'existence n'ont point de puissance'.

weaker than that of Alexander's. Individuals, however, are considered for actualization as members of possible worlds. Ultimately, God decides which *world* to create and not which *per se* possibility to create.³⁵ Hence, if the notion of an individual includes the free decrees of God, taken as possible, these decrees must refer to a whole world rather than to an individual in itself. For this reason, the sense in which existence can be said to be included in the concept of individuals clearly refers to the second sense of existence discussed in Section 3, namely a relation among possible individuals. More specifically, it is the relation that picks out the most harmonious or the most perfect set of compossible individuals. It is thus clear that this notion of existence is not a simple containment of a predicate in a concept, when considered as a mere possibility.

Given the above considerations, I would like to address the apparent inconsistency of Leibniz's view, if only very briefly. As noted, Russell argued that Leibniz's equivocation is an expression of his inconsistent system. My approach here certainly differs from Russell's. My primary interest is to clarify the internal reasoning that led Leibniz to his position. At the same time, it should be noted that an equivocation is not necessarily a philosophical sin. Rather, if clearly defined and systematically used, an equivocation need not be seen as masking a contradiction but as distinguishing between two contexts in which this notion differs significantly and in a systematic way.³⁶ Leibniz's writing on this point is certainly not clear enough. Yet, the difference between created and non-created beings seems to be clearly and systematically demarcated and well motivated. All the more so, when we recall that it accentuates the difference between a necessary being and contingent ones; and that created beings are contingent precisely upon the free decrees of the necessary being (their creator). Leibniz's distinction between these two senses of existence, while not as clear as we would like, is certainly systematic, well grounded and motivated in his philosophy.

This is not to say that Leibniz's twofold notion of existence does not generate a severe tension. Rather, the main point of this article has been precisely to show that the tension between these notions of existence and the notion of logical possibility led Kant to generalize the view of existence, according to which existence need not be seen as a predicate at all. This was no doubt a very significant revolution in philosophy. As we have seen above,

³⁵My own view is that complete concepts and worlds turn out to refer to one and the same thing. But this is a claim that I substantiate elsewhere. For now, it suffices to say that the merit and hence the exigency to exist of each individual is considered in conjunction with the other individuals compossible with it, or, what comes down to the same thing, as part of the possible world to which it belongs.

³⁶It is instructive to compare what Descartes says about the notion of substance: 'Hence the term "substance" does not apply univocally, as they say in the schools, to God and to other things; that is, there is no distinctly intelligible meaning of the term which is common to God and his creatures' (*Principles of Philosophy* part I article 51, cited from Cottingham, Stoothoff and Murdoch (1985) Vol. I, 210).

this Kantian revolution was a culmination of an enormously complex and interesting evolution in which Leibniz's view of possibility plays a very important role. The main point of this article is to bring the role played by Leibniz into the foreground.

5. CONCLUSION

The picture underlying this complex story can be now sketched along the following lines: Kant's point that existence is not a predicate, clearly articulated in Kant's 1763 essay, is strongly related to a new picture of the relations between essence and existence. In such a picture, the notion of essence is to be understood in terms of pure logical possibility or, more precisely, in terms of consistent relations between concepts – relations that make no reference to existence. While the seeds of such a conception had been germinating for a good few centuries (at least since Scotus), an explicit and influential identification of the essence of an individual with its complete concept or possibility was systematically developed and articulated by Leibniz.

Leibniz thus carried out the separation of essence from existence a long way. Yet he stopped short of God. For Leibniz, as for Descartes and Spinoza, essence and existence are conceptually related in God's definition. It can be argued that Leibniz's reasons for stopping at God are, in the end, his deep religious and theological commitments. As I pointed out, however, Leibniz had, interwoven with his theological concerns, deep philosophical reasons for maintaining this position. As it turns out, some of these reasons (especially that the possible presupposes something actual) are taken up in Kant's essay of 1763, where he is already endorsing the view that existence is not a predicate.

Indeed, any attempt to generalize the Leibnizian view that existence is not an essential predicate of created things would have to confront the intrinsic connection Leibniz supposes between essence and existence in the concept of God. In addition, any attempt at such a generalization would have to reconsider, if not revise, the indispensable role God's understanding plays in Leibniz's modal system. As it turns out, this is precisely what Kant does in his *Critique of Pure Reason* in which he argues that *a priori* proofs (from concepts alone) for existence claims in general (and for God's existence in particular) are impossible. Likewise, in his critical period, Kant is placing the conception of possibilities not in God's understanding, as Leibniz does, but rather in the human understanding. According to Kant in the first Critique, the empirical content available to the human understanding is constrained by its subjective conditions of sensibility. These conditions, in turn, constrain human judgement about both possibility and existence. This topic, however, must wait for another occasion.³⁷

³⁷I would like to thank the participants of the Oxford and Princeton Seminars in Early Modern Philosophy where early versions of this paper were presented. In particular, I would like to

A NOTE ON THE METHOD OF CITATION

Citations from Kant's *Critique of Pure Reason* are given by reference to the pagination of the first (A) edition and/or the second (B) edition. Citations from all other Kant's works are given by the volume and page number, separated by a colon, in the standard edition of Kant's work, the Academy edition (*Gesammelte Schriften* ed. Königlich Preussische Akademie der Wissenschaften (Berlin: de Gruyter, 1902-), Vols 1–29). Unless otherwise indicated, all translations are from the *Cambridge Edition of the Works of Immanuel Kant*, General editors, Paul Guyer and Allen Wood (1992-), abbreviated as CE. Citations from Leibniz's works are given by reference to the standard Academy edition (A) and by reference to the following standard abbreviations and translations.

ABBREVIATIONS

- A Leibniz, G. W. *Sämtliche Schriften und Briefe* (Darmstadt/Leipzig/Berlin: Edition of the Berlin Academy, 1923-). Cited by series volume and page.
- AG Leibniz, G. W. *Philosophical Essays*, edited and translated by Roger Ariew and Daniel Garber (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1989).
- GP *Die Philosophischen Schriften von Leibniz*, edited by Carl I. Gerhardt, 7 vols (Berlin: Weidmann, 1875–1890); reprinted (Hildesheim: Olms, 1978).
- LR Leibniz, G. W. *Discours de métaphysique et correspondance avec Arnauld*, edited by Le Roy, G. (Paris, Vrin, 1970).
- Pk Leibniz, G. W. *De Summa Rerum: Metaphysical Papers 1675–1676*, translated and edited by Parkinson, G. H. R. (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1992).

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