

LEIBNIZ ON EXISTENCE



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A NEW PERSPECTIVE BY K. STRANG

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Leibniz on the Necessity of Existence

Leibniz relies on two principles which he considers fundamental to rational enquiry: (i) the principle of contradiction where anything involving a contradiction is false and (ii) the principle of sufficient reason where nothing can be true or exist without a sufficient reason or cause. Leibniz begins:

‘ . . . For neither in any one single thing, nor in the whole aggregate and series of things, can there be found the sufficient reason of existence . . . however far you go back to earlier states, you will never find in those states a full reason why there should be any world rather than none, and why it should be such as it is . . . the reason must be sought elsewhere. For in things which are eternal, though there may be no cause, nevertheless a reason must be discerned; which reason in things that are permanent is necessity itself or essence . . . ’ (Leibniz, *On the Ultimate Origination of Things*, Philosophical Writings, edited by G.H.R. Parkinson, J.M. Dent & Sons Ltd 1973, 136)

Leibniz identifies metaphysical necessity with God but this is superfluous as his following argument reveals:

‘Let me explain a little more distinctly how out of truths that are eternal or essential or metaphysical there arise truths that are temporal, or contingent or physical. First we must notice, from the very fact that something exists rather than nothing, that there is in things that are possible, or in possibility or essence itself, a certain need for existence, or (if I may so put it) a claim to exist; and, to put it in a word, that essence in itself tends towards existence. From this it further follows that all things which are possible, or express essence or possible reality, tend by equal right towards existence in proportion to the quantity of essence or reality which they include, or in proportion to the degree of perfection which belongs to them; for perfection is nothing else than quantity of essence.’ (*ibid.*, 137-138)

He goes on to argue that everything which does not exist struggles to exist, but not all possibles can exist because they are not all ‘compossible’. ‘The existent is the being which is compatible with most things’. And:

‘Hence it is seen to be most evident that out of the infinite combinations of possibles, and infinite possible series, that one

exists by whose means the greatest possible amount of essence or possibility is brought into existence . . . once it has been granted that being prevails over non-being, that is, that there is a reason why something should exist rather than nothing, or that transition from possibility to actuality is to take place, then, even if nothing further is determined, the consequence is that there exists as much as is possible in accordance with the capacity of time and place (or of the possible order of existing) – in very much the same way as tiles are fitted together so as to put in as many as possible within the given area.’ (*ibid.*, 138)

So once the necessity of moving from the possible to the real has been established what exists flows logically from this. There is no room or need for a God in the sense of a designer or creator and we do not therefore fall into the trap of having to explain why an omnipotent being chose to create a world so full of suffering etc. Leibniz has to say that God was somehow constrained by logical necessity to create the best of all possible worlds and this was parodied in Voltaire’s *Candide*. However ‘the best’ is to be interpreted as the world with most essence or the opportunity of maximising essence.

So, in the beginning (i.e. the logical beginning, not a date in time) was an infinite set of possibilities. In order for this to be true, a subset of these must of necessity be actual, otherwise the idea of the possible loses all meaning. A subset of an infinite set is also infinite. In order to be actual, not only does the infinite subset of possibilities have to exist but it also has to be known – what is the point of something existing if it is not brought into the light of consciousness – it may as well not exist. In order to be known the infinite subset of possibilities has to be coherent. Hence the world as we find it. Look around you – this is what a coherent subset of infinite possibilities looks like.

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