NECESSITARIANISM IN LEIBNIZ'S *CONFESSIO PHILOSOPHI*

Joseph Michael ANDERSON[*]

Abstract. Leibniz's *Confessio philosophi* (1672–1673) appears to provide an anti-necessitarian solution to the problem of the author of sin. I will give here a brief reading of what appear to be two solutions to the problem of the author of sin in the *Confessio*. The first solution appears to commit Leibniz's spokesman (the Philosopher) to necessitarianism. The Theologian (Leibniz's interlocutor) objects to this necessitarianism, prompting the Philosopher to offer a modified version that appears to exorcise this doctrine. As it turns out, Leibniz holds that these two solutions are in fact the same. I will thus conclude by reconciling these solutions, arguing for giving priority to the more radical first solution. I will argue for this by looking at the connections between the *Confessio philosophi* and some of Leibniz's other works in its genre around its time. It will be argued that Leibniz does not find the necessitarianism, which references to per se contingencies are supposed to solve, to be problematic in 1673.

Keywords: Leibniz, Necessitarianism, Necessity, *Confessio philosophi*, Evil, Author of Sin, Problem of Evil

Introduction

Leibniz's *Confessio philosophi* (1672–1673) appears to provide an anti-necessitarian solution to the problem of the author of sin.[1] I will here argue that Leibniz's uses of "contingency" in this early manuscript dialogue were intentionally deceptive. Leibniz intended to offer only the appearance of contingency so that this work might appeal to less radical theologians when in reality it offers a more radically necessitarian solution to this problem than it is found in his mature works.

I will give here a brief reading of what appear to be two solutions to the problem of the author of sin in the *Confessio*. The first solution seems to commit Leibniz's spokesman (the Philosopher) to necessitarianism. The Theologian (Leibniz's interlocutor) objects to this necessitarianism, prompting the Philosopher to offer a modified version that appears to exorcise this doctrine. As it turns out, Leibniz holds that these two solutions are in fact the same. I will thus conclude by reconciling these solutions, arguing for giving priority to the more radical first solution. I will argue for

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[*] University of South Florida, Department of Philosophy, FAO 226, Tampa, FL 33620 email: jmanders@mail.usf.edu

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Two Solutions to the Problem of the Author of Sin

The *Confessio philosophi* opens with a discussion of the justice of God in light of the doctrines of election and reprobation. The Philosopher explains that the damned are rejected, not because God *wills* it, "but by God's permitting it when the nature of things demanded it."[2] The Theologian responds to this by posing the problem of the author of sin,

> How is it that he [God] is not a *promoter of sin* if, having knowledge of it (though he could have eliminated it from the world), he admitted it or tolerated it? Indeed, how is it that he is not the *author of sin*, if he created everything in such a manner that sin followed?[3]

The problem being considered, then, is that since the sins in the world are the result of God's causal activity, how is it that God is not their author?

Leibniz's first solution from the *Confessio* focuses on removing blameworthiness from God by suggesting (1) that from God's existence, all created things follow ("if God is taken away, so is the entire series of things, and if God is posited, so is the entire series of things") and (2) that sins result from God's understanding, not from his will ("I think, therefore, that sins are not due to the divine *will* but rather to the divine *understanding* or, what is the same, to the eternal ideas or the nature of things [...].").[4]

While in other early writings[5] Leibniz describes the connection between God and the world depicted by (1) as a necessary connection, the word "necessary" is absent from this portion of the *Confessio*. Despite this omission, the Theologian's accusation of necessitarianism[6] prompts the Philosopher to recast his solution in less radical terms. The Philosopher, thus, proposes his second solution by defining away the problem of the author of sin and *apparently* the first account's necessitarianism with it. First, regarding the problem of the author of sin, Leibniz writes,

> *To will in favor* of something is to be delighted by its existence; *to will against* something is to be sad at its existence or to be delighted at its non-existence. *To permit* is neither to will in favor nor to will against, and nevertheless to know. *To be the author* is by one's will to be the ground of something else.[7]

Following these definitions, Leibniz concludes "that it is not God but rather man, or the devil, who alone will in favor of sin, i.e., take delight in evil."[8] God is not delighted by the existence of evil and so cannot be said to will evil, but neither is he sad at its existence. God permits sin, knowing that it accords with the general good. Humans and demons lack this knowledge and so are not exonerated.[9] Thus, the

second account, instead of suggesting that all things follow from God's existence and sins from His understanding, relies rather on definitions of willing and authoring to demonstrate that God cannot be the author of sin.

It still remains to be seen how the Philosopher evades the charge of necessitarianism. This is also accomplished with definitions. He defines *necessity* and *contingency* in terms of logical contradiction and clear conception, writing, "I will designate that as *necessary,* the opposite of which implies a contradiction or cannot be clearly conceived […].Those things are *contingent* that are not necessary."[10] Leibniz is here utilizing the notion of per se possibility[11] which will remain a part of his philosophy for the remainder of his career. Robert Adams describes this view as follows:

> On this view, the actual world, and the things that exist in it, are not necessary but contingent, because other worlds are possible in which those things would not exist. The possibility of those other worlds does not depend on the possibility of God's choosing them. It is enough, for the contingency of the actual world, if the other possible worlds are "possible in their own nature" or "do not imply a contradiction in themselves," considered apart from God's choice.[12]

Leibniz emends the *Confessio* years later. In the emendations, he explicitly distinguishes between per se and absolute necessity. Absolute necessity considers not only the individual essence of a particular thing but also its relationship to other necessary things.

There is an oddity in Leibniz's use of the per se modalities here. Robert Sleigh Jr. writes, "Although the 'per se' terminology is not therein employed, this is, in a sense, the purest use of the per se modalities you will find in Leibniz; in the original *Confessio* Leibniz took them to *be* the unqualified modalities."[13] Thus, when Leibniz uses "necessity" in this second solution, he is referring to per se necessity even though it seems the objection really ought to be concerned with absolute necessity. Leibniz wisely has the Theologian point out this oddity: "But isn't whatever will be such that it is ⟨absolutely⟩ necessary that it will be, just as whatever was, was necessarily, and whatever is, similarly is necessarily?"[14] Leibniz's response to this objection is a straightforward denial, "Absolutely not; that is false […]."[15] Note that the term "absolute" in the Theologian's objection above was added to the text at a later date. Before the emendation, the way Leibniz wrote the Philosopher seemed to indicate that he understood the Theologian's objection to be using the definition of necessity provided (not absolute necessity, but per se necessity). The Philosopher's response misses the issue by clarifying[16] his definition (a definition of per se necessity) rather than arguing that necessitarianism (which relates to absolute necessity) is false.

A Closer Look at the First Solution

As it stands, we have *some* evidence that Leibniz was not truly concerned with necessitarianism and so suggested something that is contingency in name only so he could deny necessity in name only. It could however be the case that Leibniz was genuinely concerned with necessitarianism and really thought the addition of per se modalities would solve the problems that absolute necessitarianism raised. But this does not hold: since Leibniz considers these not two solutions but two accounts of one solution,[17] we must ultimately reconcile them in a future section. In this section, my task is to show that Leibniz *really* takes the first account to be a necessitarian solution to the problem of the author of sin.

In *On Freedom*, Leibniz gives testimony of his early necessitarian period as follows:

> When I considered that nothing happens by chance or by accident (unless we are considering certain substances taken by themselves), that fortune distinguished from fate is an empty name, and that no thing exists unless its own particular conditions are present (conditions from whose joint presence it follows, in turn, that the thing exists), I was very close to the view of those who think that everything is absolutely necessary, who judge that it is enough for freedom that we be uncoerced, even though we might be subject to necessity, and close to the view of those who do not distinguish what is infallible or certainly known to be true, from that which is necessary.[18]

Following Adams,[19] I take it that Leibniz is understating the necessitarianism of his youth. Leibniz's early Letter to Magnus Wedderkopf was clearly a part of this early necessitarian period.[20] But there are a number of ways in which this letter is closely related to the *Confessio philosophi*. First, there are fewer than two years between the writing of these two documents. Consider also the strong similarities in the language used in the letter and in the *Confessio*. In the letter, Leibniz writes, "From this it follows that whatever has happened, is happening, or will happen is the best and, accordingly, necessary."[21] What leads Leibniz to this necessitarianism in the letter is an early form of the principle of sufficient reason and considerations of divine perfection, and a harmony, the creation of which is objectively the best course of action for a perfect being. He writes,

> For everything must be reduced to some reason, which process cannot stop until it reaches a primary reason [...]. What, therefore is the ultimate basis for the divine will? The divine intellect. For God wills those things that he perceives to be the best and, likewise, the most harmonious; and he selects them, so to speak, from the infinite number of all the possible [...]. However, since God is the most perfect mind, it is impossible that he is not affected by the most perfect harmony and thus must bring about the best by the very ideality of things.[22]

In the *Confessio*, Leibniz makes a statement similar to the letter's statement of necessitarianism, writing, "I cannot deny that God is the ultimate grounds of things," and clarifying that statement by adding, "if God is taken away, so is the entire series of things, and if God is posited, so is the entire series of things […]. Take away or change the series of things, and the ultimate ground of things, that is, God, will be done away with or changed."[23] What brings Leibniz to the conclusion that God is the ultimate ground of all things (even human choices) is similarly the principle of sufficient reason,[24] divine perfection, and harmony.[25]

It is puzzling, then, that the term "necessary" and related terms are not used by the Philosopher to present the first account. Leibniz's necessitarianism was not a public doctrine as is seen in the conclusion of Leibniz's Letter to Wedderkopf, where he writes, "I do not wish [these remarks] to be made public. For not even the most proper remarks are understood by everyone."[26] Given the subject matter of the *Confessio*, we can assume that Leibniz meant it to be read by theologians who would be wary of this radical doctrine.[27]

Additionally, it is curious that when the Philosopher lays out his method for producing the second solution from the first (that is, substituting the definitions of necessity and like terms for the appearance of the words[28]) he seems to have forgotten that these words were not used in the first solution. If my reading is correct, Leibniz's plan in the *Confessio* was to offer a stipulative definition of "necessity" to (illegitimately) sidestep the issue of necessitarianism. The addition of "necessity" early in the document would have ill-served this goal. That the first solution is treated as if it had used these words (as seen both in the objection and in the method for a response), gives further evidence that Leibniz saw the first account as a necessitarian solution to the problem of the author of sin.

The Priority of the First Solution

There are two ways in which one can reconcile these two solutions. One might give priority to the second account; indeed, it feels natural to do so given that it is supposed to overcome an objection posed to the first. In spite of this, I believe we ought to give priority to the first solution. I will argue for this from the *Confessio philosophi*'s connection to other texts in this period of Leibniz's career, and from considerations internal to the text of the *Confessio*.

The *Confessio philosophi* is one of a number of texts characterized by an attempt to resolve the tension between mechanistic philosophy and Christian orthodoxy. Daniel Garber, describing these early texts, writes, "Beginning as early as the *Demonstrationes catholicae* from the late 1660s, Leibniz tried to show how the mechanical philosophy then popular in progressive intellectual circles requires us to turn to God at crucial moments."[29] Garber points to the *Confessio naturae contra atheistas* of 1669 as an important effort in this conciliatory program. In that work Leibniz argues that the new mechanistic philosophy requires "a mind ruling the whole world, that is, God."[30] After the *Confessio naturae*, then, Leibniz has to his satisfaction demonstrated that the mechanical philosophy requires acceptance of certain religious doctrines; however, the result of such thinking is a radically deterministic view of the relationship between

God and the world. It is in light of this relationship between God and the world that the problem of the author of sin appears. Between the two confessions, Leibniz writes the Letter to Magnus Wedderkopf. The letter (like the *Confessio philosophi*) attempts to resolve this difficulty between the deterministic relationship between God and the world on the one hand, and the justice of God on the other. In the letter, Leibniz does not resolve this difficulty by softening the connection between God and the world, but rather relies on its strength to render God innocent.

> What, therefore [since 'everything must be reduced to some reason'], is the basis of the divine will? The divine intellect […]. What, therefore, is the ultimate basis of the divine intellect? The harmony of things […]. However, since God is the most perfect mind, it is impossible that he is not affected by the most perfect harmony, and thus must bring about the best by the very ideality of things […]. From this it follows that whatever has happened, is happening, or will happen is the best and, accordingly, necessary.[31]

Here Leibniz argues that God's perfection necessarily results in his selection of the most perfect series of things possible.

There is a close progression in these texts. In the *Confessio naturae*, Leibniz shows that the mechanistic philosophy requires us to turn to God. This mechanistic view of the world raises theodical problems. In the Letter to Wedderkopf, Leibniz begins to address the problem of the author of sin relying on the necessity of the world as a part of that defense; he, however, worries about the reception of such a radical solution. In the *Confessio philosophi,* Leibniz offers a slightly different[32] defense against the problem of the author of sin attempting something that might be more easily swallowed by the more conservative.

In the *Confessio philosophi*, I find a careful reading of the text between the two solutions to be instructive. The Philosopher responds to the objection that sins are necessary by saying, "By the same argument, you would conclude that all things are necessary… [and] that contingency is removed from the nature of things, contrary to the manner of speaking accepted by all mankind."[33] Leibniz clearly finds the objection problematic, but why? The difficulty he cites with denying contingency is that it is contrary to the *common manner of speaking*. Hence, the Philosopher says of the objection, "Its entire difficulty arises from a twisted sense of words." Leibniz then proceeds to provide his own definitions for terms like "necessary," and when these are utilized, the difficulty is supposed to vanish:

> Omit only those words just mentioned from this entire discussion [necessity, possibility, […]and as often as you need substitute their meanings or definitions, and I wager whatever you like that, as it were by a certain exorcism, as if a torch had been carried there, all the obscurities would disappear immediately, all apparitions and specters of difficulties would vanish like fine vapors.[34]

Leibniz has penned a solution to the problem, and now will reconcile that solution to common language[35] using a series of definitions. But recall that there Leibniz's definitions of modal terms substituted per se modalities for absolute modalities. This move does not allow Leibniz to avoid the problems posed by necessitarianism (which surely have more to do with rewards and punishments being distributed for actions that are unavoidable than with accounting for ordinary ways of speaking), but I believe it does allow Leibniz to accomplish his primary goal: providing a sense in which phrases like "sins are necessary" come out false. The necessitarian story remains the same, but without the word. The point is to lead more traditional theologians into a necessitarian solution to the problem of the author of sin without their knowledge.

Further, if Leibniz really believes that the per se modalities provide an important sense of contingency at this early age, it is odd that they are not put to any important use in the *Confessio philosophi* aside from responding to this objection. One might expect Leibniz to utilize them when discussing human freedom. In his mature philosophy, Leibniz defines freedom in terms of spontaneity, intelligence, and contingency.[36] In the *Confessio*, though Leibniz had worked out a notion of per se contingency, it does not enter into the discussion of freedom. G.H.R. Parkinson makes the case that human freedom in the *Confessio* is "constituted by spontaneity with choice" and that "the connections between judgement and will, and between will and act, are *necessary* connections."[37] I would find it surprising if Leibniz thought this was a meaningful notion of contingency and did not use it in his account of human freedom.

Viewing the *Confessio* as an attempt to reconcile a mechanistic approach to solving the problem of the author of sin with common language expressions (and the Theologian's objection as specifying the primary term to be accommodated), I judge that Leibniz has succeeded. His success, though, is clearly a shallow one. By relying on stipulative definitions of modal terms, Leibniz may satisfy those who only want to make the sentences that express their beliefs true, but isn't the deeper concern about the injustice of punishing or rewarding actions that are unavoidably caused by the giver of rewards and punishments?[38]

The Combined Solution

Since Leibniz clearly holds that these are not two solutions but one,[39] it is important that they be reconcilable. Having shown that the second account need not oppose the necessitarianism of the first, the major task remaining is to resolve the tension between the role of the divine understanding in the first account and the act of permission in the second, both of which are presented as grounding the evil in the world. Recall that Leibniz defined *to permit* as, "neither to will in favor nor to will against, and nevertheless to know."[40]This indicates that those things that occur and exist in the world which fall under this category of *being permitted* (which importantly includes evils) exist without any influence of the will. There must be some basis for their existence that is separate from God's will. This fills in our picture of divine causation in this second account. Some things exist *with* God's will; these are willed.

Other things exist without God's will; these exist by the understanding and are permitted. This link between the understanding and permission as well as the grounding of (at least some aspects of) the world in the divine understanding gives evidence of the unity in Leibniz's two accounts.

Joining these two accounts, we can construct a unified solution to the problem of the author of sin. Leibniz evades the problem of the author of sin by arguing that God does not will evil and hence is not the author of sin. The understanding produces that which is most harmonious. This harmony involves a mixture of good and evil. God's will delights in the good produced and delights in the nonexistence of the uncreated evil. The evil in the world is neither *willed against* nor *willed for*, but nevertheless exists because of harmony (or nature of things) – this is called permission. Thus, Leibniz's final outcome is that "It is not God but rather man, or the devil, who alone will in favor of sin, i.e., take delight in evil."[41]

Conclusion

We have seen that the *Confessio philosophi* presents two accounts of a solution to the problem of the author of sin. While Leibniz gives the appearance of denying necessitarianism in the second account, he provides us with hints that this appearance is disingenuous. Early in his career, Leibniz is satisfied with the necessitarian solution to the problem provided in the first account, but he attempts to make it appear less suspicious to naïve eyes. Hence, the second account serves only to provide a sense in which "sins are necessary" is false. By the end of the 1670s, Leibniz will reject necessitarianism, perhaps as a result of encountering Spinoza's metaphysics in the second half of that decade and seeing the similarities between his doctrines and Spinoza's. Leibniz will later accept the per se modalities as part of a rejection of necessitarianism, but while writing the *Confessio philosophi*, he had not yet felt the weight of the difficulties this doctrine poses. And so, he had not yet abandoned his necessitarianism.

References
[1] Robert Sleigh. Jr., for example, suggests this reading. "Leibniz may have taken the per se modalities to be the unqualified modalities, and, hence, believed that the per se modalities provided an escape from necessitarianism." See Sleigh, R.C., Jr., "Leibniz's First Theodicy",*Noûs*30, Supplement: Philosophical Perspectives 10,Metaphysics (1996): 481–499 here 496. See also, Sleigh, R.C., Jr., "Introduction" to Leibniz, G.W., *Confessio philosophi: Papers Concerning the Problem of Evil, 1671–1678,*ed. and trans. R.C. Sleigh, Jr. (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2005), xxiv–xxvii.
[2] Leibniz, G.W., *Confessio philosophi*, 31.
[3] Leibniz, G.W., *Confessio philosophi*, 33.
[4] Leibniz, G.W., *Confessio philosophi*, 41.
[5] Leibniz, G.W., Letter to Magnus Wedderkopf, *Confessio philosophi*, 2–5.
[6] "For since the existence of God is necessary and sins are a consequence of the existence of God, i.e., of the ideas of things, even sins will be necessary. For whatever follows from what is necessary is necessary." (Leibniz, G.W., *Confessio philosophi,* 49).
[7] Leibniz, G.W., *Confessio philosophi,*55.

[8] Leibniz, G.W., *Confessio philosophi,* 63.

[9] Leibniz, G.W., *Confessio philosophi,* 65.

[10] Leibniz, G.W., *Confessio philosophi,* 53–55.

[11] This quotation taken by itself leaves it undetermined whether per se modalities or some other notion is being used. In the later emendations Leibniz explicitly refers to per se modalities. Given the passage from *Confessio philosophi,* 57, quoted below, it is clear that Leibniz was in fact intending these to be per se modalities in the initial drafting.

[12] Adams, R.M., *Leibniz: Determinist, Theist, Idealist* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1994), 12–13.

[13] Sleigh, R.C., Jr. (1996), 496.

[14] Leibniz, G.W., *Confessio philosophi,* 57.Wide angles indicate the later emendations.

[15] Leibniz, G.W., *Confessio philosophi,* 57.

[16] This clarification comes in the form of a denial of closure for necessity; Leibniz, *Confessio philosophi,*55. This allows contingent existences and events to follow from God's necessary existence. Clearly, this is a feature of per se modalities.

[17] Leibniz, G.W., *Confessio philosophi,*51.

[18] Leibniz, G.W., *Philosophical Essays*, ed. and trans. R. Ariew and D. Garber, (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1989), 94.

[19] Adams, R.M. (1994), 11.

[20] "However, since God is the most perfect mind, it is impossible that he is not affected by the most perfect harmony and thus must bring about the best by the very ideality of things. But this does not detract from freedom. For it is the highest form of freedom to be forced to the best by right reason; whoever desires another form of freedom is a fool. From this it follows that whatever has happened, is happening, or will happen is the best and, accordingly, necessary." (Leibniz, G. W., Letter to Magnus Wedderkopf,2–5).

[21] Leibniz, G.W., Letter to Magnus Wedderkopf, 5.Note that "necessity" here cannot mean per se necessity as it follows from universal harmony.

[22] Leibniz, G.W., Letter to Magnus Wedderkopf, 3.

[23] Leibniz, G.W, *Confessio philosophi,*41, 45.

[24] "Whatever exists, at any rate, will have all the requisites for existing; however, all the requisites for existing taken together at the same time are a sufficient reason for existing. Therefore, whatever exists has a *sufficient reason for existing*." (Leibniz, G.W., *Confessio philosophi,* 33).

[25] "Some loved less were *rejected*, not by God's willing it (for God does not will the death of the sinner) but by God's permitting it when the nature of things demanded it" (Leibniz, G.W., *Confessio philosophi,* 31); "Sins occur to bring forth a universal harmony of things, thus distinguishing the light by means of shadows. However, the universal harmony is a result not of the will of God but the intellect of God, or of the idea, that is, the nature of things." (Leibniz, G.W., *Confessio philosophi,* 45).

[26] Leibniz, G.W, Letter to Magnus Wedderkopf, 5.

[27] Indeed, Otto Saame has shown that some of the marginalia to the manuscript belongs to Nicolaus Steno; see Leibniz, G. W., *Confessio philosophi*, ed. and trans. O. Saame (Frankfurt am Main: V. Klostermann, 1967). Sleigh Jr., after making note of Saame's research, notes that Leibniz mentions having shown an early dialogue on freedom to Antoine Arnauld while in Paris; see Sleigh, R.C., Jr. (2005), xxii–xxiii. The time and content suggest that some version of the *Confessio* is likely to be that dialogue.

[28] Leibniz, G.W., *Confessio philosophi,* 51.

[29] Garber, D., "Leibniz, Theology and the Mechanical Philosophy," in *Branching Off: the Early Modern Quest for the Unity of Knowledge,* ed. V. Alexandrescu (Bucharest: Zeta Books, 2009), 170.

[30] Leibniz, G.W., *Philosophical Papers and Letters*, ed. and trans. L.E. Loemker, 2nd ed. (Dordrecht: D. Reidel, 1969), 112.

[31] Leibniz, G.W., Letter to Magnus Wedderkopf, 2–5.

[32] Leibniz's full solution to the problem of the author of sin in this letter also relies on an evaluation of sins as being ultimately good because they contribute to the perfection of the world.

[33] Leibniz, G.W., *Confessio philosophi*, 49.

[34] Leibniz, G.W., *Confessio philosophi*, 51.

[35] G.H.R. Parkinson also suggests that Leibniz is interacting with common language later in the *Confessio,* when the issue at hand is human freedom: "I suggest that we can make better sense of what Leibniz says about reason and freedom if we take him to be operating with a concept of freedom which is not associated with any particular philosopher or school, but is held by ordinary people." (Parkinson, G.H.R., "Sufficient Reason and Human Freedom in the *Confessio philosophi*," in *The Young Leibniz and His Philosophy (1646–1676)*, ed. S. Brown (Dordrecht: Kluwer Academic Publishers, 1999), 212).

[36] Leibniz, G.W., *Theodicy*, trans. E.M. Huggard (Chicago: Open Court, 1985), §302.

[37] Parkinson, G.H.R. (1999), 211–212; emphasis added.

[38] Perhaps that Leibniz thinks this approach is satisfactory is a reflection of his low opinion of certain theologians, though Steno doesn't seem to swallow Leibniz's solution.

[39] Leibniz, G.W., *Confessio philosophi*, 51.

[40] Leibniz, G.W., *Confessio philosophi*, 55.

[41] Leibniz, G.W., *Confessio philosophi*, 65. Admittedly, there is much that remains mysterious in this solution. I (perhaps unduly) excuse myself from going further as my main goal has been to argue for the necessitarianism of the piece as a whole.