

# William King on Free Will\*

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## Abstract

William King's *De Origine Mali* (1702) contains an interesting, sophisticated, and original account of free will. King finds 'necessitarian' theories of freedom, such as those advocated by Hobbes and Locke, inadequate, but argues that standard versions of libertarianism commit one to the claim that free will is a faculty for going wrong. On such views, free will is something we would be better off without. King argues that both problems can be avoided by holding that we confer value on objects by valuing them. Such a view secures sourcehood and alternate possibilities while denying that free will is simply a capacity to choose contrary to our best judgment. This theory escapes all of the objections levelled against it by Leibniz and also has interesting consequences for ethics: although constructed within a eudaimonist framework, King's theory gives rise to a very strong moral requirement of respect for individual self-determination.

**Keywords:** William King, free will, theodicy, Gottfried Leibniz

William King's *De Origine Mali* was first published in 1702, and was the subject of published commentary by Pierre Bayle ([1703] 1737, 650–683) and Gottfried Leibniz (1710b). An English translation (under the title, *An Essay on the Origin of Evil*) with extensive notes by Edmund Law went through five editions between 1731 and 1781.<sup>1</sup> However, King's book has mostly been neglected by historians of philosophy.<sup>2</sup>

In justification of this neglect, Arthur O. Lovejoy remarks that, on the central topic of moral evil, "King for the most part repeats the familiar arguments" (Lovejoy [1936] 1960, 222–223).<sup>3</sup> Further, although King has been described as "perhaps the most well-known eighteenth-century proponent of the free will

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1. For further details on the reception of King's book in the 18th century, see Greenberg 2008, 206–207. On the historical context of Law's annotated translation, see Stephens 1996.

2. King's other major work in philosophical theology, the *Sermon on Predestination* (King 1709), has received some attention due to the responses it drew from Anthony Collins and George Berkeley. See O'Higgins 1976; Berman 1976; Daniel 2011; Curtin 2014; Pearce 2018. King also sometimes appears in discussions of Irish political and religious history. See Richardson 2000; Fauske 2004.

3. I thank David Berman for directing my attention to Lovejoy's discussion.

response to the problem of evil” (Kraal 2011, 222), the account of free will he employs has been regarded as unsophisticated and implausible. Thus James Harris takes King to hold that “freedom manifests itself most clearly in cases of completely arbitrary choice” (J. A. Harris 2005, 204), choice which is “indifferent to the deliverances of the understanding” (51) and uninfluenced by motives (73). On Harris’s view, King takes freedom to be a capacity to choose for no reason and King provides no plausible account of how such a faculty is possible or why it would be desirable.

My aim in this paper will be to argue that King’s account of free will is in fact more interesting, original, and sophisticated than has previously been recognized. As King sees things, the central problem for the theory of free will is to explain how free will can possibly be a good thing, given that it is bad to be able to choose anything other than the best. King responds to this problem by arguing that free will consists in a faculty of *election* whereby we bestow value on objects. After a brief discussion of King’s analysis of the problem of free will, I argue, contrary to previous interpreters, that King’s elections should not be understood as individual events of choosing to perform particular actions, but rather as attitudes of valuing adopted by agents. On the basis of this understanding of election I argue that King is able to answer all of the objections raised against him by Leibniz. Finally, I show that King’s theory of election has a very interesting consequence for moral theory: although constructed within a broadly Aristotelian eudaimonist framework, King’s theory gives rise to a very strong moral requirement of respect for individual self-determination.

## 1 The Value of Free Will

King begins his discussion of liberty by drawing a distinction between those who admit “liberty from external *compulsion*, but not from internal *necessity*” and those who admit liberty from both (King 1702, §5.1.1.1).<sup>4</sup> I will call the former philosophers ‘necessitarians’ and the latter ‘libertarians’. The necessitarians hold that “whoever can follow his or her own *judgment* in things to be done is *free*” (§5.1.1.8).<sup>5</sup> Hence the necessitarians, though they have a notion of liberty, are not properly speaking defenders of free *will*, but only of free *action*.<sup>6</sup>

4. Translations from the Latin are my own, based on Law 1781. King’s way of framing the dispute here is likely drawn from the Hobbes-Bramhall debate (see Chappell 1999).

5. King has Locke primarily in mind here, as can be seen by the references to ‘uneasiness’ in King 1702, §5.1.1.9 and elsewhere. See Locke (1690) 1975, §§2.21.29ff. According to Law’s note to §5.1.1.9, “The most remarkable defenders of [necessitarianism], among the Moderns, seem to be *Hobbs [sic]*, *Locke*, (if he be made consistent with himself) *Leibnitz [sic]*, *Bayle*, *Norris*, the *Authors* of the *Philosophical Enquiry concerning Human Liberty* [Anthony Collins], and of *Cato’s Letters* [John Trenchard and Thomas Gordon].” However, not all of these sources were available to King himself.

6. This is explicit in Hobbes: “there be two questions: one, whether a man be free in such things as are within his power to do what he will; another, whether he be free to will . . . In the former [question], whether a man be free to do what he will, I agree with the Bishop [Bramhall]. In the latter, whether he be free to will, I dissent from him” (Hobbes [1656] 1999, 72).

According to the libertarian position, “though we can elect nothing but under the appearance of the good . . . yet this does not determine the election, because every object may be varied, and represented by the understanding under very different appearances” (King 1702, §5.1.2.2). Thus liberty arises from the ability of the will to “suspend the action, and command the understanding to propose some other thing, or the same under another appearance.” By this means, the will “determines itself without necessity” (§5.1.2.3) and is therefore free. Libertarians, including King himself, thus generally use the terms ‘free will’ (Latin *arbitrium liberum*) and ‘liberty’ (Latin *libertas*) interchangeably (see, e.g., §5.1.2.8).

King argues that both of these views are defective. The necessitarian view, according to King, does not provide the kind of freedom needed for moral responsibility (§§5.1.1.13, 15–17). Furthermore, it undermines the distinction between natural and moral evil needed for King’s theodicy (§5.1.1.14). Finally, if neither God nor humans have a stronger sort of liberty than this, then there is no contingency in nature (§§5.1.1.12, 5.4.6).

The libertarian, on the other hand, allows for genuine liberty and therefore is not subject to the complaints against the necessitarian (§5.1.2.4). However, the standard libertarian view is, according to King, still unacceptable:

Free will [on the libertarian view] appears to be of no use: for if it certainly follows the decree of reason, it is not free, at least from necessity, since that very reason it follows is not free. If it does not follow [reason] necessarily, it would be better to lack [free will], since it would pervert everything, and disturb the order of reason, which is best. Therefore, this sort of liberty would harm humanity, since it would make them liable to sin, and produce no good anywhere to compensate for so great an evil (§5.1.2.8; also see §5.1.2.5).

This complaint against standard versions of libertarianism sets up King’s own approach to the problem of free will. In King’s view, the problem is unsolvable as long as we continue to assume that “*goodness* . . . is in the things themselves . . . [and] not to be *invented* . . . but *discovered*” (§5.1.2.5). As long as this is the case, any ability of the will to deviate from the judgment of the understanding is “more harmful than beneficial to humans.”

This, then, is the puzzle: genuine free will must involve freedom from internal necessity, that is, it requires the psychological possibility of willing otherwise in the same circumstances. But the psychological possibility of willing less than the best is a possibility we would be better off without. Further, it is a possibility that God, who is supremely free, does not have.<sup>7</sup> King’s line of thought in response is this: if a free being may be necessitated to will what is best, but a free being cannot be necessitated to will a particular course of action, then a free being must have the ability to *make* one course of action better than another. We turn now to a detailed exposition of King’s account of how this occurs.

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7. For the claim that God is perfectly free, see King 1702, §1.3.6. For the claim that God cannot will less than the best, see §3.7.

## 2 The Theory of Election

According to King,

*Good* and *evil* are opposites, and arise from the relation things have to each other: for since there are some things that help one another, and others that harm one another; since some things agree, and others disagree, we call the former good and the latter evil (King 1702, §2.1).

More precisely, “If . . . there is any natural force in anything which promotes or impedes the exercise of any power or faculty, this [thing] is to be esteemed good or evil with respect to that [power or faculty]” (§5.1.3.2). Good and evil, then, are always relative to a power or faculty. For instance, light and colors are good for sight. What is good for a being—a being’s happiness or objective flourishing—is whatever is good for that being’s faculties, and in particular its ‘most perfect’ faculty (§5.2.2).

Most powers or faculties have a necessary connection with their objects, which are therefore good for them. God thus knows, from eternity and independent of God’s willing, what is good or bad for the various possible faculties of this sort and can use this knowledge to guide creation. However, the faculty of election that, according to King, is the root of free will is:

a power of a quite different nature from these . . . To which no one thing is naturally more agreeable than another but that will be the fittest to which it shall happen to be applied, between *which* and the *object* to which it is determined by it self or by something else there would naturally be no more appropriateness or connection than between it and any other thing; but all the *appropriateness* there is would arise from the *application* or determination (§5.1.3.4).

Since “the appropriateness of the object to the faculty is all the goodness in it, therefore there is nothing good in regard to this power . . . until it has embraced it, nor evil until it has rejected it” (§5.1.3.5). As a result, “the very nature of [election] is to *make* an object agreeable to [the faculty of election], i.e., good” (§5.1.3.17, emphasis added). Thus it is King’s view that some objects—those that are good for ordinary powers or faculties like sight or digestion—are good of necessity and independent of the election of any free beings. Other objects, however, are good because they are elected.<sup>8</sup>

On King’s theory, the good for any being is whatever conduces to the successful exercise of its faculties. On such a view, goods are *relative* in the sense that every good is a good *for* something, but these relations are nonetheless *objective* in the sense that they are not typically determined by anyone’s beliefs or preferences. So far, this is a common view in the history of Western

8. Thus Greenberg (2008, 215) is mistaken in attributing to King the view that “no objects are intrinsically good or bad independent of agents.” King’s view is rather that good or bad is always good or bad *for something* and nothing is good or bad *for the faculty of election* prior to agents’ exercise of that faculty. The case is quite different with respect to other faculties.

philosophy; one can find a similar approach, for instance, in Aristotle (*Nicomachean Ethics* 1097b22–1098a17). King’s distinctive addition to this picture is the suggestion that free beings possess a faculty of election which is successfully exercised whenever it gets what it elects. Thus it is objectively good for a free being to have what it elects.

Note that, contrary to J. A. Harris (2005, 51), the good here is not “the sheer pleasure of choosing.” Rather, by means of the exercise of the faculty of election, *the object elected* (not the election itself) becomes good for the faculty of election, and therefore good for the agent. When one gets what one elects, one gets something that is genuinely, objectively good for one. This goodness is, however, not grounded in the nature of the object, but only in the exercise of the faculty of election.

According to King’s official definition, an election is an agent’s self-determination in acting or refraining from acting (King 1702, §5.1.3.16). However, as King is at pains to emphasize, such self-determination is possible only because prior to election “many things are indifferent” to the agent—that is, there is no unique best option (§5.1.3.16). The role of election is to remove the agent from this ‘undetermined’ state by removing the ‘indifference’ of the objects, i.e., *by making one better than the others*. King explains:

the very nature [of election], is to make an object agreeable to itself, i.e., good, by its own act. For this goodness of the object does not precede the act of election, so as to elicit it, but election brings about the goodness in the object, i.e., the thing pleases because it is elected, it is not truly elected because it pleases (§5.1.3.17).

Making the object agreeable (good) is not merely an *effect* of election but rather *the very nature* of election, and it is the agreeableness of the object that removes the agent’s state of indifference and makes action possible. This determination to action is a *self*-determination because the agreeableness is not something previously in the object discovered by the understanding, but rather something *conferred* on the object by the agent. Hence, on King’s view, Buridan’s Ass cannot simply make an arbitrary choice between the two equally attractive piles of hay. Rather, in order to break the impasse and avoid starvation the donkey (here imagined to possess free will) must, by an exercise of the faculty of election, bring it about that *the two piles are no longer equally attractive*. This can be done without any change in the intrinsic features of the piles or the donkey’s beliefs about those intrinsic features: all that is needed is a change in the donkey’s *values*, a *preference* for (e.g.) the left over the right. This preference or valuation is arbitrary, but the resulting action is not, for the preference itself confers additional value on the left pile which removes the indifference and permits rational action.

King unfortunately never explicitly describes the process whereby election leads to action, and this lacuna is in large part responsible for the misunderstandings and dismissals of King’s account documented at the beginning of this paper. However, some progress can be made on this issue by considering King’s

remarks on the relation between understanding and will, and on the sense in which one who acts freely may be said to act for reasons.

Regarding God's 'indifference' between options prior to creation, King writes:

Unless therefore we attribute to *God* an active power of determining himself in indifferent [matters] . . . he would do nothing at all . . . since no reason could be imagined, why *God*, being absolutely perfect in himself [and] absolutely happy should create anything outside himself (King 1702, §5.1.4.5).

King here claims that, if God did not have a faculty of election God would have no reason to create and *consequently*—because God lacked a reason—would not create. According to King, we can avoid this conclusion by attributing a faculty of election to God. Now, there are two ways of avoiding the conclusion: either we can reject the conditional, *if God lacks a reason then God doesn't create*, or we can reject its antecedent, *God lacks a reason*. Interpreters like James Harris, who see King's theory of election as a theory of arbitrary choices without reason, would see King as rejecting the conditional. This, however, is problematic, since King criticizes previous versions of libertarianism for making free will a faculty for acting irrationally. In fact, King argues that free actions, on his view, generally *are* undertaken for reasons:

You will say: if these things are true, this agent will be determined to act by *chance* not *reason* . . . As for *reason*, whoever puts a lesser good ahead of a greater [good], must be judged to have elected without reason, but one who by electing makes that a greater good, which prior to election had no good or less good in it, that person certainly elects with reason (§5.1.3.18).

King's use of the phrase 'elects with reason' (*cum ratione eligit*) is admittedly a bit puzzling here. However, the chief aim of the section is clearly to argue that action is in some sense determined by reason and not chance. On the other hand, elections, on King's view, are clearly not determined by reason. Instead, King's view must be that the act of election allows for the *action* to be determined by reason. This will nevertheless be a kind of self-determination since the reasons are provided by the faculty of election, rather than by anything external to the agent. The agent can be said to elect 'with reason' insofar as the agent's election *creates* a reason that wasn't there before and this reason in turn determines the agent to action.

Reasons, regardless of their source, cannot motivate an agent unless the agent understands them. Although King argues, against the necessitarians, that the understanding cannot determine the will (§5.5.2.13), he admits that "it is certain that we make use of the understanding in elections" (§5.2.3). King explains, however, that:

the understanding never declares that a thing is to be done except when it has determined that thing to be better [than the alternatives]. Therefore since the goodness of things with respect to this

power [of election] depends on its determination . . . it is appropriate for the understanding to defer to the determination of this power first, [and only then] propose [its] judgment (King 1702, §5.1.3.7)

King, then, is reasonably explicit in the following claims: First, the act of election determines the understanding's judgment about which action is best, rather than the other way around. Second, this occurs because the act of election alters the values of objects. Third, because election alters the values of objects so that the object chosen is best, the agent can be said to elect 'with reason' and the agent's action can be said to be determined by reason rather than chance. From this third claim we can infer that in the passage about God King means to say that his theory of election permits us to say that, despite God's 'indifference' prior to creation, God nevertheless acts for reasons in creating. The question that King fails to answer (the lacuna mentioned above) is how the action arises from the will's creation of reasons (by election) and/or the understanding's recognition of those reasons. Here my (admittedly somewhat speculative) suggestion is that what King sometimes calls 'determination to action' is in fact a second act of the will, distinct from election, and this act is determined by the judgment of the understanding. This nevertheless amounts to a self-determination insofar as the understanding's judgment depends on prior elections.<sup>9</sup>

If this is indeed King's view then, I suggest, Law has done a disservice by translating *electio* and its cognates indifferently as 'choice' or 'election'. When one (consciously or subconsciously) weighs up the reasons and selects a course of action (which is what is most commonly meant by 'choice' in English), one is not electing that action. The election occurs prior to this process, for there can be no weighing of reasons until one has made one's elections and thereby determined the values of objects.<sup>10</sup> As we will see, this distinction is crucial for King's ability to answer some of the most serious objections to his view.

King's position is that some objects may possess some value or disvalue prior to being valued (elected) by any being, but when a free being values (elects) something he or she thereby *confers* value on that object. This picture, King argues, is not liable to the objections he had raised to necessitarianism or to previous versions of libertarianism. Unlike necessitarianism, it makes the agent "the true *cause* of his actions" in such a way as to secure the possibility of doing otherwise, so that "whatever he does may justly be imputed to him" (§5.1.3.19). In addition to securing human moral responsibility, this also secures

9. I thank an anonymous referee for pressing me to clarify the relationship between election and determination to action.

10. Although I find Law's translation objectionable on this point, his interpretation is in other respects in agreement with mine. According to Law, King does not attribute to human beings "*a power to choose without reason,*" but only freedom from "determin[ation] by the judgment of the understanding concerning things antecedently agreeable or disagreeable to our natural appetites." Such freedom is possible because "Good is not an *absolute* thing, but *relative*, and consists in the agreeableness of one thing to another" and the faculty of election determines what is to be agreeable to itself. In other words, it is possible to be free from determination by judgments of *antecedent* agreeableness because there is another kind of agreeableness which is *subsequent* to election (Law 1781, note to §5.1.1.18).

the contingency of the world since God could have valued different features of possible creations thereby making a different possible creation best (King 1702, §5.1.4.5–9). Unlike previous versions of libertarianism, King’s theory does not make free will a capacity for choosing evil over good or for choosing a lesser good over a greater (§5.1.3.18). Instead, according to this view, the agent is determined to the action she judges to be best, but by her elections she is capable of changing which object is best:

Therefore since the goodness of things, with respect to this power [of election], depends upon its determination . . . it is manifest that the judgment of the understanding concerning things depends on this same [determination], and that it cannot pronounce upon the goodness or badness of them until it perceives whether the power [of election] has embraced or rejected them (§5.1.3.7).

King’s theory is sufficiently anti-necessitarian to bring with it a certain degree of arbitrariness: the agent’s elections, her most fundamental valuing, are to some extent arbitrary or brutally contingent (though, as we shall see in §4 below, at least some elections may be made for reasons). Nevertheless, the free agent is not understood on King’s view as an agent who acts arbitrarily or irrationally. The free agent takes the course of action she judges to be best, but it is in her power to alter which action is best. In this way, King’s theory preserves the notion that the agent is the ultimate source of her actions and that she could have acted otherwise in the very same circumstances, and he does so without succumbing to the problematic kind of arbitrariness he takes to be involved in previous libertarian theories. Free will is not simply a faculty for going wrong.

### 3 Leibniz’s Objections

In the remarks on King’s book that Leibniz appended to his *Theodicy*, Leibniz remarks that “the first four [chapters of King’s book], where it is a question of evil in general and of physical evil in particular, are in harmony with [Leibniz’s own] principles” (Leibniz 1710b, §1). While the details are complex (see Antognazza 2014), Leibniz is certainly correct in seeing King’s general approach in this part of the book as similar to his own. However, Leibniz continues, “the fifth chapter . . . speaking of freedom and of the moral evil dependent on it, is constructed on principles opposed to [Leibniz’s]” (Leibniz 1710b, §1). According to King, the necessitarian eliminates all contingency (King 1702, §5.1.1.12) and collapses the distinction between natural and moral evil (§5.1.1.13). Leibniz complains that in making this first claim King “confuses a Thomist with a Spinozist” (Leibniz 1710b, §13). Thomists (including, apparently, Leibniz himself) hold that “the will is moved by the representation of good and evil.” However, unlike Hobbes and Spinoza, they deny “that the will is prompted to its resolution by an absolute necessity” (§13).<sup>11</sup> Regarding the second claim—

11. Leibniz does (at least sometimes) recognize a distinction between freedom of action and freedom of will (e.g., Leibniz [1704] 1962, §§2.21.8, 2.21.21), and therefore is not technically



that the necessitarian collapses moral evil into physical evil—Leibniz claims to be able to distinguish these just as the libertarian can. However, according to Leibniz, “the principle followed in the solution of those [difficulties] which natural evils have raised suffices also to account for voluntary evils.” By denying this, and supposing that a totally new kind of reply is necessary for responding to moral evils, King “manufacture[s] new difficulties” (Leibniz 1710b, §16).

In addition to replying to King’s objections to necessitarianism, Leibniz raises three objections to King’s theory of election, and these will be the focus of the present section. First, Leibniz objects that King’s theory is inconsistent with the Principle of Sufficient Reason and, further, King cannot reject the PSR since he (implicitly) employs it in his argument for the existence of God (§§3, 6). Second, he objects that King’s argument leads to a vicious regress since the faculty of election itself would have to choose what to elect (§16). Third, Leibniz objects that King’s view, by making good or bad depend on election, leads to a radical form of voluntarism on which God “would . . . have acted wisely and justly if he had resolved to condemn the innocent” since God’s election would make the condemnation of the innocent good (§21). These three objections stem from a common concern: can elections be made on the basis of reasons? Relatedly, can elections be judged good or bad, right or wrong, rational or irrational? In this section, I show how King can answer each of Leibniz’s three specific objections. In the next section, I will discuss King’s response to the underlying question of reasons (moral and otherwise) for and against elections.

Leibniz’s objections purport to be *internal* objections to King’s system. That is, Leibniz’s claim is not simply that King’s system is incompatible with Leibniz’s commitments, but rather that King’s theory of free will is not viable given King’s own commitments. In saying that King has answers to Leibniz’s objections, I mean that Leibniz does not succeed in showing that King’s philosophy has these kinds of internal problems. As we will see, it nevertheless remains the case that King and Leibniz are constructing on opposing principles, and hence that there are excellent reasons within Leibniz’s philosophy for rejecting King’s theory.

All three of Leibniz’s objections can be answered by the recognition that election, for King, does not immediately determine the agent to action. Rather, to elect something is to *value* or *care about* it. This kind of valuing confers value (goodness) on its object (see King 1702, §5.5.2.13). The agent is subsequently determined to action by the judgment of the object’s value, which takes this election into account. King’s theory avoids the problematic kind of arbitrariness King saw in previous versions of libertarianism precisely by making the election prior to (and hence distinct from) determination to action.<sup>12</sup>

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a necessitarian in King’s sense. Nevertheless, Leibniz evidently sees his own view as among those that need to be defended against King’s anti-necessitarian arguments.

12. Law explicitly denies that King’s view involves the ability to choose without a reason or against reason. Instead, according to Law, it involves “choosing indeed without any motive or cause which is foreign to the will . . . but has the cause, motive and end of its actions in itself” (Law 1781, 280n). This ‘cause, motive and end’ is the value placed on the object by the faculty of election.

Leibniz sometimes recognizes this aspect of King's view, as when he says that, according to King, we have the "admirable privilege of rendering things good or tolerable by choosing them, and of changing all into gold by the touch of this wondrous faculty [of election]" (Leibniz 1710b, §3; cf. §18). Nevertheless, Leibniz continues to think of election as an immediate, arbitrary determination to action, and his objections therefore fail to make contact with King's view.

To begin with, then, Leibniz objects that King's view is inconsistent with the PSR. King, however, is perfectly willing to admit that his view involves a rejection of any PSR as strong as that endorsed by Leibniz (and Spinoza):

Nor ought one to ask what is the reason for the *election*, that is, why [God] wills this rather than that; for to posit a reason is to take away the indifference and the election would no longer be free . . . since the divine will is active in itself . . . it is its own reason for action, and determines itself freely (King 1702, §5.1.4.9).

Thus the mere assertion that King's view is inconsistent with Leibniz's PSR is (from King's perspective) as yet no objection.

The substance of Leibniz's objection is his claim that King has committed himself to the PSR by implicitly employing it in his argument for the existence of God:

The author believes also especially concerning motion, that it is not sufficient to say, with Mr. Hobbes, that the present movement comes from an anterior movement, and this one again from another, and so on to infinity. For, however far back you may go, you will not be one whit nearer to finding the reason which causes the presence of motion in matter. Therefore this reason must be outside the sequence; and even if there were an eternal motion, it would require an eternal motive power. So the rays of the sun, even though they were eternal with the sun, would nevertheless have their eternal cause in the sun. I am well pleased to recount these arguments of our gifted author, that it may be seen how important, according to him, is the principle of sufficient reason. For, if it is permitted to admit something for which it is acknowledged there is no reason, it will be easy for an atheist to overthrow this argument, by saying that it is not necessary that there be a sufficient reason for the existence of motion (Leibniz 1710b, §6).

In attributing this argument to King, Leibniz apparently has in mind §1.2.3, where King argues as follows:

the nature of matter (insofar as it is known to us) is indifferent to *motion* and *rest*, nor does it move unless [something] moves it. Motion therefore does not follow from its nature, nor is it contained in its essence, nor do we conceive it to arise from that [essence]. It is therefore merely passive in regard to motion, and an agent must be sought elsewhere. If you say it has been in motion from *eternity*, you

make no progress, since duration does not alter the nature of things. If it has moved from eternity, it has had an *eternal cause* ... and there was an eternal agent that produced that *eternal motion* in it ... But you will say, what is *eternal*, since it was never made, does not require a *cause*. Why not? Suppose the sun to have shined from eternity, and the earth, nourished by its heat, to have undergone eternal changes of seasons. Did those changes then have no cause? ... we must [therefore] acknowledge that there is something besides *matter* and *motion*, which is the cause of motion.

As can be seen, Leibniz's account of King's argument is reasonably accurate, and the claim that the argument relies on some form of PSR is initially plausible. However, a closer examination of the context of the argument reveals that the attribution to King of an implicit reliance on the PSR is unjustified, since King explicitly formulates a principle weaker than Leibniz's PSR that will serve the needs of his argument. This is the principle that "in all action it is necessary ... that there be an *agent* and a *patient*" (King 1702, §1.2.3). King's remarks about the passivity of matter, and about motion not following from the essence or nature of matter, are meant to show that matter is merely a patient and not an agent in motion. Thus King's argument can be reconstructed as follows:

1. In every action there is an agent and a patient.
  2. The motion of matter is an action.
  3. Matter is not the agent in its own motion.
- Therefore,
4. There is an agent distinct from matter.

The sun example is a response to an objection. King imagines an objector arguing that premise 1 is not true on grounds that eternal actions might lack agents. To take the case most relevant to the argument, the objector might suppose that if matter had always been in motion then, since its motion never *began*, there would be no need to suppose there was an agent involved in the motion of matter. King's example of the earth's eternal changes of season is meant to motivate the intuition that even an action which has been occurring from eternity must have an agent: even if the earth has always undergone changes of seasons, still there must be an agent responsible for that action, namely, the sun.

Whatever the merits of King's argument, it is valid given merely King's own explicitly formulated principle about action and stands in no need of the full-strength PSR. Leibniz's first objection therefore fails.

Leibniz's second objection claims that King commits a sort of 'homunculus fallacy' which leads to a vicious regress:

One will have it that the will is alone active and supreme, and one is wont to imagine it to be like a queen seated on her throne, whose

minister of state is the understanding, while the passions are her courtiers or favourite ladies, who by their influence often prevail over the counsel of her ministers. One will have it that the understanding speaks only at this queen's order; that she can vacillate between the arguments of the minister and the suggestions of the favourites, even rejecting both, making them keep silence or speak, and giving them audience or not as seems good to her. But it is a personification or mythology somewhat ill-conceived. If the will is to judge, or take cognizance of the reasons and inclinations which the understanding or the senses offer it, it will need another understanding in itself, to understand what it is offered (Leibniz 1710b, §16).

The objection is that the libertarian conceives of the will as being itself like an agent that chooses between the courses of action proposed by reason and the various passions. However, in order to choose among these, the will would itself need to have motives, and so we would need to posit another understanding to understand these motives together with another will to choose between them, and so *ad infinitum*.

As Julia Jorati points out, the metaphor employed by Leibniz is similar to one used by John Bramhall (Bramhall [1655] 1999, 45–46; Jorati 2017, 150n6). The problem Leibniz raises is also faced by many versions of agent-causal libertarianism, such as that endorsed by Samuel Clarke ([1705] 1998, §§9–10) and later Thomas Reid ([1788] 2010).<sup>13</sup> However, King does not endorse such a view.

In his correspondence with Clarke, Leibniz accepted (with only slight reservations) Clarke's characterization of his view as one on which motives are like weights in a balance determining the will to whichever side has the greatest weight (Leibniz and Clarke [1717] 1969, §§9.2–3). Clarke and Reid strenuously object to this comparison on grounds that it entirely removes choice from the equation (Leibniz and Clarke [1717] 1969, §§8.1–2; Reid [1788] 2010, 216–221, 245, 252). In their view, if the agent is to be free she must be able to choose between the two sides regardless of their 'weight'. For this reason, Reid prefers to compare motives, not to weights, but rather to "advocates pleading the opposite sides of a cause at the bar" (Reid [1788] 2010, 217).<sup>14</sup> The advocates do not (even indeterministically) *cause* the judge to rule one way or another; they merely *persuade*.

While King does sometimes employ this same language of persuasion (King 1702, §5.2.2), he does not share the view of Clarke and Reid. Election, in King's view, is *not* an ability to choose regardless of the weight of the considerations on each side. It is rather an ability to *alter* the weight of the considerations (§5.1.3.18). Thus King has no reason to object to the image of weights in a balance. He simply attributes to the agent an ability to put her thumb on the scale.

13. For discussion of Leibniz's objection in connection with Reid, see Kroeker 2007.

14. For discussion, see Kroeker 2007; Pearce 2012, 168, 171–172.

Leaving the realm of metaphor, we may make the point by means of a well-worn philosophical example. Suppose some agent is choosing whether to become a surgeon or a concert pianist. In Leibniz's view, in such a case, as in all choices, "the will always follows the most advantageous representation" (Leibniz 1710b, §13). According to Clarke and Reid, the agent may exercise agent-causal power to choose either option regardless of the motives on either side. King's view differs from either of these. According to King, the agent's understanding will represent to her the goodness or badness that is perceived to be in each option prior to any election of hers. Since, according to King, suffering is bad prior to any election (see King 1702, §§5.1.3.10–12), presumably becoming a surgeon will be the better option since it will relieve more suffering. However, the agent may *elect* music. If she does so, she increases the value of music simply by her valuing of it. Depending on how much she values music, becoming a concert pianist may be a better option for her than becoming a surgeon because of the way she values or cares about music. Her freedom consists not in an ability to ignore the weights in the balance, but in an ability to *alter* them.

Leibniz would likely argue that this view still involves a homunculus fallacy and still leads to a regress, since the agent must *decide* to put her thumb on the scale on one side or the other. This, however, merely points to a limitation of the analogy. Election is not an action like moving one's arm. One does not ordinarily will or choose to elect something. Rather, an agent's election is her valuing of something over other things. Some agents simply value some things, and this alters the calculation of good and evil in proposed courses of action. There is therefore no need for a homunculus to stand behind the first-order choice and make a second-order choice of which way to decide.

As the 'simply' here indicates, and as King explicitly recognizes in the case of God (§5.1.4.9), there *is* a kind of arbitrariness here, and a violation of Leibniz's PSR. In order to preserve alternate possibilities, King requires that there is not always a sufficient reason (in Leibniz's sense) for elections. But, again, King avoids the kind of arbitrariness or capriciousness he found problematic in previous libertarian theories. The free agent is *not*, for King, the agent who can choose the lesser good over the greater, but rather the agent who by her election (valuing) can bring it about that an object that would otherwise have been a lesser good is in fact best.

Leibniz's third and final objection is that King's view commits him to a radical form of voluntarism. That is, Leibniz alleges that on King's view whatever God chose would be good simply because God chose it, even if God chose "to condemn the innocent" (Leibniz 1710b, §21). Leibniz correctly recognizes that King would not accept this consequence, but argues that his view entails it since, on his view, "there is nothing in objects save what is indifferent to the divine will before its choice" (§21).

This, however, is incorrect. It is true that King asserts that "nothing in creation is either good or bad *for him* [God] before his election" (King 1702, §5.1.4.2 [emphasis added]). However, this must be understood in light of King's general theory of what is good or bad *for something*. As was observed above, King regards goodness as a fundamentally relational notion. The good is what

“promotes . . . the exercise of any power or faculty” (King 1702, §5.1.3.2). But God “cannot be helped or harmed by anything” (§5.1.4.2). It is for this reason that prior to election nothing is good or bad *for God*. However, it is crucial to King’s account of physical evil that certain things are good or bad *for creatures* prior to any election, even God’s. Indeed, even in the course of arguing that “All the goodness . . . of the creatures is owed to the divine will, and depends on it” (§5.1.4.3), King does not assume that God can make things good or bad by mere fiat. Rather, things become good for God because, once God elects certain things, they become agreeable to God’s faculty of election by being conducive to what God values. Things become good in relation to creatures when God makes them “agreeable to one another” (§5.1.4.3).

It does not follow from King’s view that all goodness or badness is created by mere fiat. Thus Leibniz’s third objection, as stated, fails. However, King *is* committed to the claim that God has the power to elect (value) the condemnation of the innocent in such a way as to confer on it a positive value, and we humans may perhaps have this power as well. More generally, King’s view threatens to make every action morally blameless, since when we will something we value it over the alternatives, and this apparently makes it *better* than the alternatives. If King’s theory is to have any plausibility, and if it is to do the work it is meant to do in his theodicy, then King must explain how one election can be judged better or worse than another and how we (and God) can elect on the basis of reasons. It is to this problem we now turn.

## 4 Impermissible Elections

Recall that King had objected to previous libertarian theories on grounds that they “make [humans] liable to sin, and produce no good anywhere to compensate for so great an evil” (§5.1.2.8). King’s theodicy requires that he explain how free will can be a good and yet have the possibility of going wrong as a necessary concomitant (see §5.2.14). However, King’s theory threatens to make nonsense of the very notion of going wrong (N. G. E. Harris 1987, 60). If his project is to succeed, King must explain how, notwithstanding the fact that election confers goodness on its object, it is nevertheless possible to elect badly.

In facing up to this question in the section “On Impermissible Elections” (King 1702, §5.3),<sup>15</sup> King first notes three kinds of failures of (self-interested) prudence that are possible in our elections: we may elect things that are in themselves impossible; we may elect two or more things that are jointly inconsistent; or we may elect things that are beyond our power to obtain (§§5.3.1–3). King had argued in the preceding section that “our chief happiness . . . consist[s] in the proper use of [the faculty of election]” and that nothing “can be absolutely pleasing to us but what is elected” (§5.2.2). King holds this view because he

15. The word I am translating ‘impermissible’ is *indebitis*. Law sticks closely to the etymology in translating it ‘undue’. *Debitis* means ‘owed’, in the sense of what one is obligated to pay or do. However, King clearly does not use *indebitis* to mean merely what is not obligatory, but rather what is contrary to our obligations.

holds, following Aristotle (*Nicomachean Ethics* 1097b22–1098a16), that what constitutes our happiness and is ‘absolutely pleasing’ to us must be the successful exercise of the faculty most proper to us. King argues, contrary to Aristotle, that this is the faculty of election. Thus for humans, unlike animals, the pleasures of the senses “are [merely] motives that induce us to exert an act of election, whereby we embrace them as if they were agreeable to the natural appetites” (King 1702, §5.2.2). They do not move us to action directly, but only insofar as they are elected—that is, insofar as we take those pleasures to be worth having.<sup>16</sup> Thus, since “to get what is elected is happiness, but to be disappointed and frustrated [in one’s elections] is misery” (§5.3.1), prudence demands that we elect only what we are able to obtain.<sup>17</sup>

Of more interest are the fourth and fifth varieties of impermissible elections identified by King. The fourth variety of impermissible election is “to seize for ourselves what is lawfully occupied by the elections of another” (§5.3.4), and the fifth is the election of “those things which are hurtful to ourselves and others” (§5.3.5).

Although King does not distinguish those impermissible elections that are immoral from those that are merely imprudent, it certainly appears that varieties four and five should be regarded as immoral. If, however, King is to succeed in showing that these kinds of elections are impermissible, he must be able to account for ‘lawful occupation’ and ‘hurt’ in ways that make them prior to my individual elections, and he must explain why I am obligated to respect these principles in my elections.

Hurt is the simpler case. King writes, “By hurtful things I understand those that lead to natural evils, that is, those that are prejudicial to the body or mind” (§5.3.5). Although the chief good for humans is found in what is agreeable to the faculty of election (i.e., whatever is elected), those things that are agreeable or disagreeable to other faculties are still good or evil with respect to those faculties. These are objective goods and evils prior to our elections, and so we should strive to elect what is conducive to the prior goods.

The more complex case is the case of ‘lawful occupation’ by others. Here King writes,

To be disappointed in an election is misery, as we said before; to

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16. Compare Korsgaard 1996, 93: “The reflective mind cannot settle for perception and desire, not just as such. It needs a *reason*.”

17. Thus N. G. E. Harris (1987, 57–58) is mistaken in claiming that King’s denial that we can achieve happiness by electing to satisfy animal desires is based on a Millian distinction between higher and lower pleasures. In King’s view, the problem with electing the satisfaction of animal desires is that one cannot be assured that one will continue to have the means of satisfying them: to elect the eating of beef is to render oneself miserable in every circumstance where beef is unavailable, and such circumstances are likely to arise for most human beings. Such an election is therefore imprudent. (On this point, my interpretation is similar to Greenberg (2008, 214–215), who argues that the central thing King aims to preserve in his theory of free will is the power of each agent to ensure his or her own happiness.)

If one were inclined to reduce philosophical theories to trite pop music lyrics, one might summarize Kingian prudence in the slogan: if you can’t be with the one you love, love the one you’re with. There are clear Stoic influences here.

enjoy it, happiness. Everyone therefore has a right to the enjoyment of the thing elected, to the extent that it is necessary to the exercise of his own faculties, and is no impediment to the good of others (King 1702, §5.3.4).

This line of thought is again grounded in King's relational account of goodness. There are objective goods for beings, and these are whatever things conduce to the successful exercise of their faculties. But the faculty of election is successfully exercised whenever it gets what it elects. Hence, it is good for free beings to have what they elect. When a thing is elected, it becomes good for that being who elects it not merely in the subjective sense that that being likes or prefers it, but in the objective sense that it becomes part of that being's flourishing. This generates an obligation for all free beings to respect that election, that is, to recognize the value of the object for the being who elects it.

Am I, then, obligated to respect the elections of others, even if those elections are *impermissible*? King advocates two limitations here. First, the election should be universally recognized "to the extent that it is necessary to the exercise of [the elector's] own faculties." In other words, my elections have no claim to be recognized if they pertain to matters that have nothing to do with me. I am perfectly capable of electing, for instance, that no one should watch football, and thereby making the watching of football by others detrimental to my happiness, but this election has no claim to be respected. Second, the election should be universally recognized "to the extent that it . . . is no impediment to the good of others." Thus, for instance, I might elect that someone should be my slave. This election (unlike the football case) would certainly expand my ability to 'exercise my faculties' by directing the labor power of another, but since it would be an 'impediment to the good of' that other, it has no claim to be respected.

Can King justify these restrictions? King's theory requires him to admit that if I make these elections the states of affairs elected do become good for me—they become part of my happiness or objective flourishing. However, as King emphasizes in his account of God's decision to create a world containing evil, in any sufficiently complex world the good of some things will conflict with the good of others. God has, according to King, created the best of all possible world systems. It is best in part because of God's own elections, but also because of the degree to which it exhibits a harmony whereby the good of one thing conduces to the good of another in as many cases as possible (§1.3.11). In the same way, King holds, we finite free beings are obligated so to elect and so to act as to bring the goods of the many beings God has created into harmony, so far as this is possible. To this end, we must respect the elections of others, but only insofar as it is possible to bring those elections into this harmony.

King's moral theory is fundamentally eudaimonistic: King holds that all goods are goods for something and that the good for a being is what contributes to the happiness or flourishing of that being. His ethics is based on the idea that we ought to pursue the good of all beings. However, interestingly, his theory of election gives rise, within this eudaimonistic theory, to a strong requirement of respect for self-determination, of the sort associated with liberal political



theory. Unlike traditional versions of eudaimonism, such as Aristotle's, King does not hold that the nature of an agent's happiness is determined for him or her in advance. Rather, since King holds, against Aristotle, that the faculty most proper to human beings is the faculty of election, and that the proper object of the faculty of election is whatever object that faculty 'embraces' (King 1702, §5.1.3.4), King ultimately attributes to the human being the ability to determine, by election, what his or her own happiness will be. In this sense, free beings are determiners of their own good. To promote the good of a free being (i.e., a being with a faculty of election) is to respect that being's elections—that is, to take that being's election of some object as a reason why that being ought to have that object. To elect well is (in part) to respect the elections of others by bringing one's own elections into harmony with them. In this sense, King takes respect for the self-determination of others as the basic moral principle for interaction among free beings.

Not only is this theory of interest in its own right, it also permits King to answer the question underlying Leibniz's objections in a way that, though still inconsistent with the PSR, has a kind of Leibnizian ring to it. Some elections are better than others because they tend to bring the goods of various beings into harmony rather than conflict.

Could not an agent still place infinite value upon the condemnation of the innocent, and thereby secure the result that it is best that the innocent be condemned, just as Leibniz objected? No. We humans are not completely unlimited in our ability to elect (§5.5.2.17), and so presumably cannot confer infinite value on anything, and cannot completely override the elections of others or the natural relations of good and evil in the world prior to election (cf. Law's note to §5.1.1.18). God presumably does have such an ability, but since God (prior to any election) cannot be benefited, King argues, God could only have created for the sake of the goodness of creatures (§1.3.9). Thus God's elections must necessarily be conducive to the good of the creatures God created. As a result, there is no possibility that either God or human beings will elect in such a way as to overthrow the moral order.

While the ultimate viability of King's theory (or *any* theory of free will) is certainly open to question, the theory is interesting and original and survives all of Leibniz's objections.<sup>18</sup>

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