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## Leibniz's Criticism of Descartes's Proof of the Existence of God

Leibnizian monads are characterized by two main features: *perceptions* or representations of the world without, and *appetitions* or „tendencies from one perception to another, which are the principles of change.” Although representation is a broad notion in Leibniz which has its own difficulties there are promising attempts to handle it in terms of intentionality. By contrast, the other main concept (or set of interrelating concepts), that of *appetition*, *conatus* or *force*, is far more difficult to deal with, and poses more interpretative problems. This is how Nicholas Recher summarizes the doctrine:

The drive or force represented by monadic appetite is the basis of all change and all novelty. This appetitive transit from one set of perceptions to another is what constitutes monadic activity and is the definitive feature of any substance. For Leibniz, the terms substance and agent are effectively coextensive. (Recher 1991, 81.)

Most commentators agree that the Leibnizian notion of *conatus* comes from Hobbes and Spinoza.<sup>2</sup> Leibniz's unquestionable debt to his predecessors does not mean, however, that his use of the term is identical with that of either of them. As he did in many other cases, Leibniz thoroughly reinterpreted the traditional notion of *conatus* as well in order to accommodate it to his own system. As opposed to Spinoza's *impetus* which tends toward self-preservation, the Leibnizian *conatus* is a force explaining the subsequent perceptual states in a monad. Since *conatus* and the related terms have an important explanatory role in Leibniz's system, puzzling questions arise as to their meaning and theoretical background. How does *conatus* come about as a metaphysical agent in nature and how does it operate?

<sup>1</sup> *Principles of Nature and Grace* 2. I use the translation to be found in Recher 1991, 79.

<sup>2</sup> The source of the modern use of the term is especially Thomas Hobbes. For a brief overview of his impact on Leibniz see Stuart Brown's "Leibniz's Formative Years" (Brown 1999, 11). A much more detailed account is "Leibniz's Debt to Hobbes" by George MacDonald Ross (see especially Ross 2007, 24–27.) On Leibniz's early use of the term *conatus* a helpful introduction is provided in Garber's "Leibniz: Physics and Philosophy" (Garber 1995) 274. sqq.

In this paper I will argue that, besides Hobbes and other early modern sources, the conceptual basis for the Leibnizian concept of force derives from late scholasticism as well inasmuch as it depends on the theory of univocal predication. To achieve this goal, first I will try to show that the conceptual content of the term *conatus* has much to do with Leibniz's criticism of Descartes's ontological proof. Accordingly, in the first section I will give the main outlines of Leibniz's criticism, then I move on to canvass the scholastic arguments on which Leibniz could rely. This will bring us directly to the problem of *conatus* and the so called "striving possibles doctrine" in the last three sections. I shall argue that the essences' striving toward existence is a univocal feature of all beings which was meant by Leibniz to provide a general scheme or conceptual framework for issues so different as the principle of sufficient reason, the existence of God, and the *conatus* or intrinsic force of the finite substances.

### *I. Leibniz's criticism of Descartes*

One of the constants in Leibniz's criticism of Descartes, which surfaced in the 1670's, and remained practically unchanged throughout his life, was his dissatisfaction with Descartes's *a priori* argument for the existence of God. Leibniz repeatedly asserted that the Cartesian proof had an important flaw and, due to its shortcomings, provided moral certainty at best.<sup>3</sup> As is well known, Descartes's starting point in the *Fifth Meditation* had been the claim that some of our ideas could be fabricated by ourselves, since they displayed properties which "I now clearly acknowledge, whether I want to or not, even if I previously had given them no thought whatever" (AT VII. 64, Ariew 128). These ideas permitted the meditator to develop an argument for the existence of God based on the concept of the most perfect being, the *ens perfectissimum*.

Leibniz believes that the weakness of the argument consists in the fact that Descartes missed to prove the logical consistency of the initial notion the whole argument is based on. This is an important flaw, Leibniz insists, because there are concepts whose consistency cannot be judged at first glance. The reason is that the intricate relations of the subconcepts contained in a complex idea can be so complicated that no one can tell for sure without further analysis whether or not they contradict each other. A notion that at first sight might seem innocuous, can turn out to conjoin contradictory elements and according to the rules of logic, such a concept may entail any proposition and the opposite of any. (Take the example of the highest even prime number which might look as sound as its odd counterpart, the highest odd prime. It needs quite a bit of investigation to show that while the

<sup>3</sup> An important overview of Leibniz's argument is to be found in Blumenfeld 1995. Especially relevant is the examination of Leibniz's claim that the Cartesian argument is incomplete (see pp. 355–356).

first notion is correct, the second one contains contradictions.) Hence it follows that in order for it to become conclusive the original argument must be completed with the demonstration of the consistency of the notion of *ens perfectissimum*. Or, to put it otherwise, we need a *real definition* of it, which makes perfectly clear that the most perfect being is possible.

Nevertheless, it is crucial to note that Leibniz does not only provide a simple addition to the Cartesian argument, but, by doing so, he thoroughly modifies it. Although occasionally he sets out to give the main outlines of the supplementation needed,<sup>4</sup> he is clearly much more interested in the way in which the new premise modifies the whole structure of the proof. He believes that in virtue of this addition the notion of *perfection*, prominent in the Cartesian proof, can even be dropped from the argument, so that all seventeenth-century debates revolving around the question if existence is or is not itself one of the perfections contained in the concept of *ens perfectissimum*, can be bypassed. In a short note of 1700 he clearly states why he focuses on the way in which the logical structure of the original proof is affected by the completion proposed:

You can say that [Descartes's] argument is basically correct if the most perfect being – the one which includes all perfections – is possible. And this is the very privilege of the divine nature (the *ens a se*), that its essence contains its existence, that is to say, if it is possible, it exists. And you can even drop the notion of perfection, and say: if the necessary being is possible, then it exists. (G 4. 404)

As the passage makes it clear, Leibniz replaces the Cartesian notion of *ens perfectissimum* with that of the *ens a se* and *ens necessarium*, necessary being. By doing so he appears to show that the crucial step in the demonstration has not so much to do with necessary relations within the divine essence, as with the connection between the possibility of the divine essence and the necessary relations contained in it. By this claim Leibniz is not only reshaping the Cartesian argument along the lines of Spinoza's reasoning about *Causa sui*, but he seems to follow the track of Duns Scotus as well who had elaborated a similar proof around the turn of the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries. Given the fact that Leibniz was very well read in scholasticism, and that the seventeenth century was one of the most important periods in the history of Scotism, the resemblances are certainly not accidental. After all, Leibniz intimates: "in my youth I was very well acquainted with the subtleties of the Tomists and the Scotists." (G IV. 291)

That said, I must confess that I could not unearth any decisive textual evidence supporting close connections between the Scotist and Leibnizian lines of thought.<sup>5</sup>

<sup>4</sup> For a good reconstruction of his arguments, see Blumenfeld 1995, 358. sqq.

<sup>5</sup> All I can pretend is that the way in which Leibniz treated the Cartesian ontological proof was a frequently repeated commonplace in the Scotist tradition. See for instance Frassen 1900, vol. 1, 126 sqq.

Though I believe that the similarities are salient, I am not willing to go so far as to rest my case on historical speculations. Yet, even if this issue remains somewhat undersupported, I believe that my final conclusions do not depend on it. If in the next section I advance some considerations about Leibniz's criticism of the Cartesian ontological proof in the context of his scholastic readings, my intention is to call attention to a possible group of sources rather than settle the question of historical influence.

## 2. *The Scotist View*

Duns Scotus' proof for the existence of God is based on the notion of causality. Nevertheless, it is certainly not a standard *a posteriori* demonstration, for, instead of taking one of the five ways of Aquinas, and inferring straightforwardly from the effects to their first cause, Scotus provides an *a priori* analysis of the notion of causality. In his view this conceptual approach has the merit of talking about necessities: "while propositions about real being are contingent, propositions about possibilities are necessary." (W. III. 229b)<sup>6</sup> The *a priori* nature of causality – Scotus proceeds to argue – consists in a necessary connection between the existence of two different entities, so that the simplest definition of causality is this: "if something exists, the existence of something else follows." In most cases, causal relation entails a kind of ontological dependence of the effect from a distinct being. This connection can be described as the effect's being *ab alio* (its being from something else). To be sure, in the case of the First Cause, which must be uncaused, there is no place for such dependence. All the same, Scotus argues that the basic conceptual structure of dependence *ab alio* is an essential feature of all being, so in some form or another it must also be found in the First Cause as well. Since, evidently, God is not dependent on anything, in his special case, the basic structure takes the form of *self-dependency*, which can be described as an existence *a se*: being-from-itself. To put it succinctly, the same conceptual structure can be expressed in two ways: in the case of finite beings it takes the form of *esse ab alio* (being-by-another), while in the case of the infinite being it is existence *a se* (being-from-itself).

Notice that it is this quasi-causal structure peculiar to the First Being that replaces the concept of *ens perfectissimum* in Leibniz. The term of being *a se*, frequently used by Leibniz, or (as Scotus puts it in his Latin) *aseity*, proves to be the most distinctive mark, which separates the First Cause from any other link in the causal chain

<sup>6</sup> By saying that Scotus's proof is not a standard *a posteriori* demonstration I do not mean to deny that the large framework of his very detailed argumentation for the existence of God in the *De primo principio rerum* and other works is *a posteriori*. The main thrust of his arguments is admittedly a deduction from the effects to their cause. In this respect I agree with James F. Ross and Todd Bates who warn from classifying Scotus's proof as an *a priori* argument. (Cf. Ross–Bates 2003, 194.) My point is, however, that the crucial step in Scotus's reasoning is the conceptual analysis of the causal dependence.

depending on it, since it refers to the unique fact that in the case of a being-from-itself no further condition is required for its existence than the mere possibility of its essence. As Scotus puts it roundly: “Whose coming about from something else (*ab alio*) is excluded by definition, that will exist from itself, if it is possible that it exist.” (W III. 231a) The stipulation “if it is possible” is obviously identical with the proposition demanded both by Leibniz when criticizing Descartes, and Scotus when supplementing the ontological proof of Anselm of Canterbury with these words: “God is something nothing greater than which can be conceived without contradiction once it has been conceived without contradiction.” (*Ord.* I d. 2 p. 1 q. 1–2 n137.)

But how can it be proved that the concept of *being-from-itself* is not contradictory? Scotus tries to fill the gap in the reasoning by showing that something is impossible only if something else rules out its existence. But in the case of a *being-from-itself*, this is plainly impossible. Scotus reasons in this way: Suppose there exists something, let us call it *A*, which rules out the being of the *ens a se*. Now, *A* is either an *ens a se*, or it depends from something else. If the first, then we have two entities *a se* mutually excluding one another. This is to say, that, once posited, both of them would rule out the being of the other, hence you can prove the non-existence of the one through the existence of the other, and vice versa. Consequently, neither of them will exist. If you take the other route and say that *A* is something dependent, then you are bound to admit, Scotus insists, that the *ens a se* is possible, since nothing dependent can frustrate the existence of something of higher rank. Thus the conclusion is this: The *being-from-itself* is possible, and therefore, necessarily, it exists. This is the only case, Scotus claims, where possibility entails existence, and it is only here that the adage often mentioned by Leibniz as well holds: *a posse ad esse valet consequentia*.

Let me sum up what we have seen so far. Scotus first extracted a structure of dependency from the concept of causality. Whereas in all but one case this structure is equivalent to an ontological dependence on something else, in the maximally excellent Being this structure amounts to the independence from all other beings. In the second case it must be said, that a being *a se* does not depend on anything else but its own possibility: *If it is possible, then it exists*. Since the notion of aseity, as noted above, incorporates the structure of causality, it dynamises the concept of God, insofar as it attributes to him an essence which does not simply contain all perfections, but, so to speak, actualizes itself from the very depth of its eternal possibility. The crucial point both in Scotist and Leibnizian reasoning is the *transition* between possible and actual existence. A possibility whose realization is not excluded by anything, necessarily passes into being without any further requirement.

But at this point some qualifications are in order. When talking about *the transition* between possible and actual existence, this passage cannot be construed as a real change in the case of God. What we have here is just a kind of *dynamism* or inner force, whose actuality has already been realized from all eternity. There is no

change in God, but the possibility of any other change is founded by the fact that divine nature is, in the sense just outlined, dynamical.

### 3. *The doctrine of the striving possibles*

A very similar line of reasoning is spelt out in Leibniz's 1697 masterpiece entitled *De rerum originatione radicali*. In this text Leibniz advances one of his most famous doctrines regarding the possible worlds, the doctrine of the striving possibles (hereinafter referred to as DSP), which, as I shall show in a moment, has much to do with the problem under discussion. This is how Leibniz formulates the DSP in the *De rerum originatione radicali*:

[W]e should first acknowledge that (...) there is a certain urgency [*exigentia*] toward existence in possible things or in the possibility or essence itself – a pretension to exist, so to speak – and in a word, that essence in itself tends to exist. (G. 7.303; L 487)

In this passage Leibniz claims that essences, that is to say possible beings in the mind of God, demand that they should exist. By stating that possible things have an intrinsic drive toward existence, the DSP poses a number of difficult interpretative problems: If essences are nothing else but mere possibilities, where do their inner tendencies or pretensions to exist come from? And if essences tend of themselves to exist, does their actual existence derive from their striving alone? Traditionally, there are two possible answers to this question.

On the first interpretation an essence's dynamic tendency to exist is understood as a kind of metaphoric circumscription. Metaphysically speaking, essences are nothing else but possible ways of participation in the divine nature. Though all participations cannot take place together (some of them being contradictory) each represents in itself some degree of perfection or excellency. Inasmuch as God, Leibniz assumes, chooses always the best (or subscribes to the principle of the best), the different degrees of perfection are indicative of the value each of the essences possessed, with respect to the divine plan of making the most perfect world. I shall call this view „figurative.” On this figurative reading, existence – strictly speaking – does not derive from the inner resources of a finite essence; it is, rather, the consequence of the fact that God always chooses the best. This first approach can be summarized in the following Leibnizian definition of existence: “That exists which pleases an intelligent and powerful agent.” (*Existens est quod intelligenti et potenti placet*, C 376.) Notice however, that this definition has an important flaw. Leibniz himself acknowledges that it presupposes the definiendum, by relating existence to a preexistent mind.

According to an alternative interpretation, striving essences do not refer to a wise and omnipotent agent, and their tendencies cannot be regarded as metaphorical. On this reading essences incorporate a real drive to exist in virtue of which their existence derives from their inner resources. I shall call this second interpretation the „real-drive view.” This can be grounded on the fact that the key text of the *De rerum originatione radicali* does not mention either God’s will or the divine choice in general. What this text offers, instead, is the picture of a metaphysical competition between the essences each of which possesses a certain force or impetus tending toward existence. On Leibniz’s account the ensuing struggle yields automatically, and without any further decision on the part of God, the existence of the most nearly perfect essences. Perfection is defined here as a relational property of any essence, in virtue of which that essence is compatible with the greatest number of other possibilities. Hence, that set of essences passes into existence “through which the greatest amount of [...] possibility is brought into existence.” (G 7. 303; L 487.) This second approach has the advantage over the first in doing justice to Leibniz’s claim that “a kind of divine mathematics or metaphysical mechanism prevails in the origin of things.” (*ibid.* L. 488, slightly modified.) On this account, the subsequent stages of the world derive smoothly from precise rules or algorithms which cannot fail to produce their effects. As Leibniz says,

When many heavy bodies pull upon each other, the resulting motion is such that the maximum possible total descent is secured. For just as all possibilities tend with equal right to existence in proportion to their reality, so all heavy objects tend to descend with equal right in proportion to their weight. And just as, in the latter case, that motion is produced which involves the greatest possible descent of these weights, so in the former a world is produced in which a maximum production of possible things takes place. (*Ibid.* L. 488.)

There is no hint whatsoever in the passage that the maximum production of possible things is mediated by the decision of God’s will. This is perplexing, of course, because Leibniz’s account appears to plainly contradict his views on creation. If there is no real role to play for the divine choice, Leibniz’ doctrine risks to fall back to a Spinozistic position of hard necessitarianism.

Given the opposing interpretations, the question arises as to which one of them is correct. The worry is that there is ample textual evidence supporting both. There are so many passages treating the origin of the world with and without reference to God’s choice that there seems to be no real chance to explain away either of the opposing approaches. Hence it follows that the real concern is not so much that of choosing between them as that of explaining how they relate to each other. Accordingly, commentators have been divided by their preference for one or the other version. The first strategy of reconciliation is to see the figurative view as a

popular version of what is explained in technical terms and more precisely in the second account. On this view, Leibniz deliberately used the conventional language of traditional theism when he spoke for instance of “a good family head (*père de famille*) who makes such use of his holdings that there is nothing uncultivated or barren.” (G 4. 430; L 306.) At the same time, he could, and occasionally did, express the very same truth in more exact terms. This strategy led some commentators to question Leibniz’s sincerity and claim that the DSP is one of the many cases where Leibniz “tends, with slight alterations of phraseology, to adopt (without acknowledgment) the views of the decried Spinoza.”<sup>7</sup> One can adopt, however, a more charitable interpretation. It can be said that the basic version of the DSP is the creationist account, while the other is just a concise way of expressing the same truth. On this reading, the real-drive view would be employed by Leibniz as a handy tool, a kind of abridgement to bypass the theological complexities of the creationist account. This second strategy has been one of the main motives for commentators to embrace the figurative account referred to above.

Though both ways of relating the alternative versions of the DSP to each other can be argued for or against by relying on one or another group of the relevant texts, it seems to me that both of them suffer from the same shortcoming. The worry is that the texts themselves do not point to either story as the authentic one, and thus do not help to settle the question of priority. When reading the crucial Leibnizian passages one has the impression that the author just did not feel the need to choose from among the alternative ways of expression. This is quite understandable if one keeps in mind that Leibniz’s overall philosophical project was meant to harmonize the conflicting philosophical and theological views rather than to produce new tensions. That is exactly the reason why I am proposing an interpretation which seems to do justice to both accounts of Creation. In my sense, both the creationist and the alternative versions are just two different but equivalent ways of expressing the same truth. They are equivalent in the sense that they roughly correspond to the two traditional approaches to metaphysics: natural theology and ontology. When talking about God’s intellect and the divine will, Leibniz advances his metaphysics as a theory whose subject-matter is the highest degree of being, the divine substance. When adopting this approach he considers metaphysics as *natural theology*. By contrast, my suggestion is that the metaphysics of the first part of the *De rerum originatione radicali* concerns *being qua being* with its most universal features without mentioning – in the crucial passages at least – the productive action of the most perfect being, God. That latter way of advancing the doctrine is consistent with another style of metaphysical reasoning prominent in the Scotist tradition which, following Avicenna, preferred to treat metaphysics in terms of ontology.<sup>8</sup>

<sup>7</sup> Russell 1900/1992, 5.

<sup>8</sup> Cf. for instance: *De ente et de aliis communibus*. Ed Vat. XVI, 253 (Lect. I. d. 3. p. 1. q. 1–2. n. 76.) and

#### 4. *The univocal reading of the DSP*

My proposal, as it might be clear by now, stems from the fact that the origin of things, explained through the dynamic nature of the essences, is based on the same logic as Leibniz's arguments for the existence of God. I think that the striking similarities between the two problems (the existence of God and the striving possibles) are neither accidental nor peripheral to Leibniz's philosophy but they shed some important light on the core of the issue. Though in the past decades many commentators have taken notice of this likeness, I do not know of any interpretation that is grounded in the univocal nature of the process of becoming in both cases. The reason why I think that the two problems are closely connected is that what we find in both cases is the dynamic and self-constitutive nature of the essences operating in itself. In the *De rerum originatione radicali* Leibniz holds that from among all possibilities it is always the most possible that takes place in the universe. That amounts to saying that those essences will exist whose actual being is excluded by the least. Likewise, divine nature exists by necessity, due to the mere fact that its existence is, so to speak, the *most possible possibility*, because it is ruled out absolutely by nothing. Existence, in both cases, is nothing else but a *transition* which, on the basis of its very possibility, takes place by itself, if all obstacles and hindrances are absent or taken away.

The claim that existence, whether of finite or infinite beings, is based on the very same principles is strengthened by Leibniz's way of explaining their reality. It seems to me that in his writings nothing indicates that he perceived any tension between the two accounts. Take the example of a fragment, dated by the editors of the *Akademie-Ausgabe* to the middle of 1685, where the two versions of the DSP, the figurative and the real-drive versions, are mentioned in tandem. Glossing on the difficulties of how to define the term *existence* Leibniz remarks,

[Y]ou must know that all possible beings will exist if they can, but all cannot exist together since they hinder each other; and for this reason that exists which is more perfect. (A VI. 4. 626)

Though in this passage Leibniz does not mention the inner *impetus* of all things to exist, this is obviously the realistic version of the DSP alluded to in the context of the existence of the best possible set of beings. But immediately after this initial claim Leibniz goes on to refer to the existence of God as well. In the same passage he concludes,

.....  
*Quaestiones quodlibetales* XIII, where *res* in its most general sense is defined as anything that does not involve contradiction. This is the first object of the intellect (cf. Vivès 25, 114a–b).

Therefore [*itaque*] the most perfect certainly exists. There is a most perfect being or the most perfect being is possible, because it is nothing else than something purely positive. (*Ibid.*)

In these statements, dealing with *existence* in general, there are two striking points. First, here Leibniz speaks, in the same breath as it were, of the existence of both finite and infinite beings, and there is no hint whatsoever that the reason behind their existence is different. Moreover, it can be seen that both lines of thought follow from the same premises. Next, notice the order of the subsequent steps in the argumentation. Leibniz first begins with the general claim that the maximal set of possible beings comes into existence, then he moves on to the *special* case of the divine existence, connecting the two reasonings simply with a „therefore.” The inference from one claim to the other is indicative of the fact that *conatus* or striving is a general feature of all beings. Technically speaking, *conatus* can be predicated *univocally* of all beings.

To use a predicate univocally means to attribute it to one or more subjects in the same sense.<sup>9</sup> In the philosophy of Duns Scotus the univocal concept of being is the primary object of metaphysics inasmuch as everything considered in it, God and the creatures alike, counts as a being in a general, basic, and unitary sense. If the science of metaphysics, Scotus argues, is to encompass all kinds of being, the meaning of its primary object must be defined without any reference to the various forms being can take (e.g. finite or infinite, necessary or contingent, actual or possible being). What I am arguing for, then, is that in Leibniz’s metaphysics the tendency to exist covers the whole realm of being and can be treated as coextensive with being in general. Even though the two basic forms of propensity differ to the extent that in one case it grounds an unconditioned, necessary being, while in the other, it depends on an external cause and gives rise to finite, contingent beings, it is the same *conatus* that is operative in both cases.

The univocal account of existence allows Leibniz to contrast his own definition of force with the old scholastic term of *potentia activa*. The latter is defined as “the proximal faculty of action which still needs some external stimuli, [...] in order to pass into actuality.” (G. 4. 469.) By contrast, this is how Leibniz describes his own notion of force or power:

It takes a middle place between pure faculty and real activity. It contains tendency, and so it passes into action by itself, without needing any further help except for the removal of all obstacles. This can be seen in a heavy weight holding tight the rope it is hanging on, or in the example of a bow. (*Ibid.*)

<sup>9</sup> According to a more technical definition, a concept is *univocal* if it cannot be attributed to and denied of the same subject without contradiction.

The last images show pretty well how the coming about of an effect can take place as an unconditioned transition from potentiality to actuality (*passage* or *transitus* as Leibniz puts it in his French and Latin respectively). And in this respect, the problem of force seems to be, simply, a special case of the general rule: possibilities engender existence, unless something prevents them (A VI. 4. 1434). This general rule obtains both in the case of the infinite essence, whose existence is necessary by virtue of its unlimited possibility, and in the case of the finite essences, whose actual being is contingent upon the final outcome of their competition:

If something can produce more than one similar but unequal effects, and one of them comes about, necessarily it is always the greatest one that obtains *ceteris paribus*. The reason is, that if it is clear [...] that only one of them can be brought about, there must be some sufficient reason why not all. If all you can say is that all are not compatible, then the *maximum* seems to follow. (A VI. 4. 1432.)

Leibniz's reasoning makes it clear that the example of the heavy weight holding tight the rope is illustrative not only of the nature of the physical forces but that of being *qua* being as well. Hence, there is an immediate connection between the *conatus* operating in the finite substances, and producing their subsequent states, and the initial unlimited and infinite tendency of the divine essence to exist. This connection seems to rule out any interpretation which attempts to take the DSP as a figurative circumscription of God's choosing the best.

### 5. *Objections considered*

It can be objected, however, that the univocal reading of the DSP implies a literalist understanding of the striving toward existence, and, if a literalist account is allowed, it is not open for anyone to deny that it certainly leads to a necessitarian position. The reason is that if essences have a real intrinsic drive to exist, the existence of the greatest number of possible things will follow immediately. In reply, I admit that the univocal reading boils down to a literalist position, but even so I do not think that the above conclusion is true. To say that essences incorporate *real* propensity to exist does not imply that finite beings come about by their inner tendencies alone. Leibniz is crystal-clear that finite essences do not contain existence and for this reason they must depend for their actual being on the creative act of God.<sup>10</sup> This does not rule out, however, the literalist reading of the DSP. All that is required by the latter is that the divine choice be somehow governed by the intrinsic propensity

<sup>10</sup> See for instance what Leibniz says in his *Notiones generales: Ex his patet Essentias rerum pendere a natura divina, existentias a voluntate divina; neque enim propria vi sed decreto Dei existentiam obtinere possunt.* (A VI. 4. 557.) Cf. also: *Deus facit optima non necessario, sed quia vult.* (*De libertate et necessitate*, A VI. 4. 1447.)

of the essences. But, before spelling out this point, I would like to contrast my proposal with one of the most detailed literalist accounts.

By taking the two versions of the DSP to refer to the same state of affairs, my interpretation comes close to that of Christopher Shields who in a seminal paper of 1986 urged for a literal reading of the DSP. Shields' intention is to show that the literalist interpretation of the doctrine does not make Leibniz's system collapse into hard necessitarianism. First, by producing textual evidence from different periods of Leibniz's career, he correctly points out that there is no reason to think that Leibniz meant the DSP as a figurative description of God's choice. Then he goes on to show that Leibniz wanted to establish a direct connection between the principle of sufficient reason, the existence of God, and the DSP:<sup>11</sup>

What exactly is this connection? God is at least a necessary condition for all actual existence. God *makes* (*facit*) all possibles strive for existence [...]. But why would God do this? The reason is clear: God subscribes to the principle of sufficient reason. As Leibniz says, „... a reason for restricting it (i.e., the desire to exist) to certain possibles in the universe cannot be found (*ratio restrictionis ad certa possibilia in universali reperiri non possit*).<sup>12</sup> (Shields 1986, 352.)

Although I agree with Shields' main conclusion that the literalist interpretation is consistent with the contingency of the world, my view is different from his in at least one respect. In his understanding, the propensity of a possible to exist is given by God who freely decided to choose the best. Accordingly, it seems to me that Shields shares an important assumption of the figurative view he wanted to attack, namely, that the intrinsic drive of the essences cannot be explained without reference to God's will. Both interpretations hold that the inner force of the essences – always proportionate to the perfection they contain – ultimately derive from the divine decision. The only difference is that the proponents of the figurative view take the impetus to consist simply in the divine preference (that is to say they equate the striving of the essences with their perfections turning God's attention to them) without attributing it literally to the essences themselves, while Shields maintains that God endows essences with *real* force or tendency toward existence. I myself disagree with both lines of thought. My opinion is that the propensity to exist does not derive from the divine will to choose the most perfect set of possibles, but God's will to make the best is dependent, partly at least, on the tendency each of the possibles previously contains in God's intellect.

I am not unaware of the fact that in some texts Leibniz is clear that the *conatus* of

<sup>11</sup> Shields 1986, 352.

<sup>12</sup> In Shields, cited mistakenly as *ratio restrictions is* [sic!] *ad certa possibilia in universali reperiri non possit*. In addition I note that the term *in universali* cannot be rendered as *in the universe*, but for the time being I bypass the problems of translation.

the essences are dependent on the divine will. As an example let me quote a passage from a long fragment entitled *Notiones generales*:

All possibles involve not only possibility but also striving (*conatus*) to exist actually. Not that a non-existent can strive, but this is how ideas of the essences, actually existing in God, postulate, after the divine decision to choose the most perfect.<sup>13</sup> (A VI. 4. 557.)

Indeed, in this passage Leibniz is quite explicit about the logical connection between the divine choice and the essences' tendency to exist. Nevertheless I do not think that this is his considered position or, better, that this is the whole story. In the light of other passages it seems to be more probable that the essences' striving toward existence is rooted, partly at least, in the intrinsic metaphysical reasons for their existence.

As is known, central to Leibniz's philosophy is the claim that the existence of the maximal set of essences results from their being more perfect than any other rival set of compossible beings. Moreover, Leibniz is careful to point out that perfection is grounded, without preliminary reference to the divine will, in the mutual interrelations of the possibilities, to the effect that the real existence of any of them can always be accounted for in terms of intelligible relations. Relations between the essences, to be sure, cannot yield existence by themselves, for part of the reasons needed for their actual being is to be sought in the *fiat* of God's will. That said, however, what Leibniz stresses is that the other part of the reasons for actual being is rooted in the essences. This double character of reasons helps us in making good sense of the passage quoted above. Given that all creaturely existence is always mediated by God's will, the DSP, indeed, must be related to the divine decision to do the best. Nevertheless, in the light of Leibniz's other texts it can be associated with the intrinsic nature of the essences as well. Surely, there is some reason for existence in each of the essences, and possibles should not be regarded in themselves as dead or static natures in the divine mind.

In an important piece of 1689, Leibniz seems to make this point by arguing that the reason for the existence of the most perfect series is identical with the reason behind existence as such:

The reason which makes this or that exist rather than others is the one which makes something exist at all, rather than nothing. This is so because, by giving a reason why some things are existent, one gives the reason why anything exists at all. The reason in question is this: the reasons for existence prevail over the

<sup>13</sup> *Et omne possibile non tantum involvit Possibilitatem, sed et conatum actu existendi, non quasi ea quae non sunt conatum habeant, sed quia ita postulant ideae essentiarum in Deo actu existentes; postquam Deus libere decrevit eligere quod est perfectissimum.*

reasons for non-existence, or, in a word, [the explanation consists in] the desire of the essences to exist (*existentiarentia essentiarum*) to the effect that the existence of the unimpeded beings ensues. Since, if nothing desired to exist there would be no reason for existence. (A VI. 4. 1634)

Notice that Leibniz in this text does not refer to God's subscription to the principle of the best. It seems to me that this passage is one of the most unequivocal phrasings of what I take to be the univocal conception of the *conatus*. Taken together with Leibniz's statements about the necessary role God's will must play in making the world, the "something rather than nothing" clause cannot refer only to the existence of the finite beings. What Leibniz is talking about is the most general feature of all Being as such, which applies to the infinite and the finite substances alike.

The assumption that the tendency to exist refers to the essences as well is a crucial step in my argumentation for it is an essential requirement of univocity. This is so, because on the account I have proposed, the basic structure of the striving can be found in both finite and infinite substances, so there must be a general scheme common to both, which can be described without any previous reference to either divine or creaturely existence. Such a description was given, I believe, in the last quote.<sup>14</sup>

Finally, I want to strengthen my proposal by making some remarks on an important piece of 1677, which I shall quote at length:

It can be doubted very much whether existence is a perfection or degree of reality; for it can be doubted whether existence is one of those things that can be conceived – that is, one of the parts of the essence; or whether it is only a certain imaginary concept, such as that of heat and cold, which is a denomination only of our perception, not of the nature of things. Yet if we consider it more accurately, [we shall see] that we conceive something more when we think that a thing *A* exists, than when we think that it is possible. Therefore it seems to be true that existence is a certain degree of reality; or, certainly, that it is some relation to degrees of reality. Existence is not a degree of reality, however; for of every degree of reality it is possible to understand the existence as well as the possibility. Existence will therefore be the superiority of the degrees of reality of one thing over the degrees of reality of an opposed thing. That is, that which is more perfect of all things mutually incompatible, exists, and conversely what exists is more perfect than the rest. Therefore it is true indeed that what

<sup>14</sup> Leibniz maintains that God is not the cause of the essences or that, to put it differently, eternal truths do not depend on Him for their intelligibility: "*Deum esse causam existentiae rerum, non vero essentiae, adeoque etiam causa erit existentiae bonorum, non vero bonitatis quae in ipsa essentia cogitatione deprehenditur. Quemadmodum Deus causa est ut aliquid triangulum existat, non vero causa est naturae trianguli, neque proprietatum ejus.*" For an excellent examination of this point with reference to Duns Scotus see Adams 1994, 186–187.

exists is more perfect than the non-existent, but it is not true that existence itself is a perfection, since it is only a certain comparative relation [*comparatio*] of perfections among themselves. (Adams 165 slightly modified, A VI. 4. 1354 = VE 2016 = B 119f.)

In this passage Leibniz is saying that existence is not a perfection, hence the bare fact that something exists, does not make it more perfect than other things. This might remind the reader to the very first paragraphs of the *Discourse of Metaphysics* where Leibniz announces that he is far “from holding to the opinion of those who maintain that there are no rules of goodness and perfection in the nature of things [...] and who say that the works of God are good only for the formal reason that God has made them.” (G 4. 427; L 304.) The two texts, beyond doubt, stand in close relation to one another, though they do not speak the same language. The passage immediately above, quoted from the *Discourse of Metaphysics*, is advanced in theological terms. Here the author is explaining that God’s will consults the divine intellect, since “every act of will implies some reason for willing” (*ibid*). The same point is made in the higher-quoted fragment without mentioning God. Here Leibniz states that existence is a “comparative relation of perfections among themselves,” and that exists “which is more perfect.” In brief, existence is the manifestation of perfection and not the ground of it. When saying that existence is a *superiority* (this is the translation of Robert Merrihew Adams), what Leibniz has in mind seems to be the original, etymological sense of the Latin term *excessus*, which suggests that existence is a kind of dynamic “coming forward or coming out” from among other possibilities which are less perfect. And in the same vein, the term *existence* is also to be taken in its original meaning, which derives from *ex-sistere*, standing out. In both cases the terms employed by Leibniz suggest the same movement, transition or passage which expresses the univocal nature of coming about.

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