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Divine Foreknowledge and Human Freedom in Leibniz Philosophy

Abstract

Philosophers and theologians wrestled with issues concerning free will and determinism, and they exercised a considerable skill and imagination in attempting to resolve them. They not only discussed, with great insight, the problems of causal determinism and the difficulties in ascribing truth value to sentences about the future, but, in addition, they pondered yet another form of determinism: Whether God's foreknowledge determines all events in the World. Although contemporary philosophers have addressed this issue, the attention given it between the fourth and the seventeenth centuries remains unequalled. This article aims to investigate seventeenth century philosopher Gottfried W. Leibniz's discussion of divine foreknowledge and human freedom.

Key Words

Divine Knowledge, Determinism, Freedom, Voluntary Action, Theodicy.

Leibniz Felsefesinde İlâhi Önbilgi ve İnsan Hürriyeti

Özet

Filozof ve teologlar hür irade ve determinizmle ilgili problemler üzerinde büyük bir çaba harcamış ve onları çözme doğrultusunda dikkate değer bir başarı ve yaratma gücü ortaya koymuşlardır. Bu insanlar, kozal determinizmin içerdığı problemleri ve gelecekle ilgili hükümlerin doğruluk değerini belirlemenin zorluklarını büyük bir kavrayışla tartışmakla kalmamış, buna ek olarak, determinizmin başka bir şekli üzerinde de uzun ve titiz düşünmeler gerçekleştirmiştirlerdir ki, o da Tanrı'nın önbilgisinin dünyadaki olayları belirleyip belirlemediği sorusudur. Her ne kadar çağdaş filozoflar bu problemle ilgilenmekte ise de, onu çözmek için dördüncü ve onyedinci yüzyıllar arasında harcanan dikkat ve çabanın bir benzeri halen bulunmamaktadır. Bu makale, onyedinci yüzyıl filozofu Gottfried W. Leibniz'in ilâhi önbilgi ve insan hürriyeti ile ilgili tartışmasını ele almayı amaçlamaktadır.

Anahtar Sözcükler

İlâhi Bilgi, Determinizm, Hürriyet, İradî Davranış, İlâhi Adalet.

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Divine knowledge is called sometimes omniscience and sometimes foreknowledge. The doctrine of omniscience raises several questions. For example, can a timeless being know what we know in knowing what time it is, or can an impassible being know what pain is like? The most serious problem, however, concerns God's knowledge of 'future contingents'. A future contingent is a thing that hasn't yet occurred, is logically contingent, and isn't necessitated by its causal history. If we are contra-causally free, the decisions we will make tomorrow are future contingents. Future contingents create two important problems: First, how can God know them? Second, is His knowledge of future decisions compatible with their freedom?

The problem of divine foreknowledge has vexed philosophers as well as ordinary believers in God since the third century. In related forms it has bothered philosophers longer than that. It is a fascinating puzzle, and for that reason attracts even nonbelievers. But to the believing person foreknowledge is not only interesting, it is profoundly important for, if it is misunderstood, it may force the religious person to give up one of a pair of beliefs both of which are central to theistic concept of God. These beliefs are, first, that God has infallibly true knowledge about everything that will happen in the future, and second, that human beings have free will in a sense of 'free' that is incompatible with determinism. For example, St. Augustine (354-430) says: "I have a deep desire to know how it can be that God knows all things beforehand and that, nevertheless, we do not sin by necessity... Since God knew that man would sin, that which God foreknew must necessarily come to pass. How then is the free will when there is apparently this unavoidable necessity?"¹

When disputes between the Dominicans and the Jesuits over the problem of free will had reached a fever pitch, the Pope forbade further debate². Needless to say, his proclamation failed to quell the controversy, and philosophers as well as theologians continued to dispute the problem. Thomas Hobbes (1588-1679) was one of the most influential contributors to this debate.

Hobbes wrote his treatise *Of Liberty and Necessity* in response to a work by the Bishop of Londonderry³. His second work relating to same subject is *The Questions Concerning Liberty, Necessity, and Chance* which defends the claims of the first, and so the two present a unified view⁴. Hobbes was thoroughly familiar with the controversies concerning God's knowledge of future contingents and the nature of free will. He criticizes the positions of the 'schoolmen' for their obfuscating language and distinctions; in particular, he claims that John Duns Scotus (1265-1308) wrote

¹ Augustine, *On Free Will*, Trans. Carroll Mason Sparrow, Univ. of Virginia Press, Charlottesville 1947, Book III, chap. ii.

² Leibniz, G. W., *Theodicy: Essays on the Goodness of God, the Freedom of Man, and the Origin of Evil*, Trans. E. M. Huggard, Yale Univ. Press, New Haven 1952, p. 168.

³ Hobbes, *Of Liberty and Necessity*, in The English Works of Thomas Hobbes, 2nd Imp., Scientia Verlag, Darmstadt 1966, Vol. 4.

⁴ Hobbes, *The Questions Concerning Liberty, Necessity, and Chance*, in The English Works of Thomas Hobbes, Vol. 5.

something about free will that not even Scotus himself could understand⁵. Hobbes, however, favors the positions of the Protestant reformers and especially their views on free will.

Having found the liberty of indifference to be a contradictory notion⁶, Hobbes equates freedom with the liberty of spontaneity: “For he is free to do a thing, that may do it if he have the will to do it, and may forebear, if he have the will to forebear.”⁷ Given this definition of freedom, an agent necessitated in an action may be free relative to that action as long as he wills to perform it. For Hobbes, such a notion of freedom is the only possible definition, given that God knows and wills all things. According to Hobbes, if God is omniscient, all things must occur necessarily, for if anything could be other than it is, God could be mistaken, which is absurd⁸. Such necessitation is, of course, in conflict with the liberty of indifference.

Now, identification of freedom with the liberty of spontaneity is not simple, for it involves a number of subtle complications. For example, Hobbes distinguishes liberty from the liberty of spontaneity. Since liberty is merely the “absence of all the impediments to action that are not contained in the nature and intrinsical quality of the agent”⁹, even a river flowing down its channel may be said to have liberty. Yet, the river cannot be said to have liberty of spontaneity, since this type of liberty is confined to living creatures. Moreover, Hobbes claims that an action that is free by virtue of the liberty of spontaneity is a voluntary action, and he also links a voluntary action with an action that is done from deliberation.

Hobbes opinions and arguments on freedom influenced such English thinkers as John Locke (1632-1704) and David Hume (1711-1776). They were studied by Gottfried W. Leibniz, who incorporated some of them into his own discourse upon the problem of the relationship between God’s omniscience and human freedom.

Leibniz struggled with this problem throughout his life, beginning with *Catholic Demonstrations* (1669), continuing through his major work on the problem, the *Theodicy* (1709), and beyond. He was well acquainted with the history of the controversies surrounding the problem, having been schooled in scholastic philosophy and having read Suarez’s *Disputationes Metaphysicae*. And his considerations on the doctrine of middle knowledge reveal his comprehension of his predecessors¹⁰.

He saw major inconsistencies, which he attempted to resolve within his philosophical framework. It is interesting that, although certain aspects of his solution cannot be understood outside this framework, the general solution he offers is strikingly similar to that presented by Duns Scotus. Thus, while Hobbes may have found Scotus

⁵ Hobbes, *Of Liberty and Necessity*, Works of Thomas Hobbes, Vol. 4, pp. 232-34; *The Questions Concerning Liberty, Necessity, and Chance*, Works of Thomas Hobbes, Vol. 5, p.266.

⁶ Hobbes, *Of Liberty and Necessity*, Works of Thomas Hobbes, Vol. 4, p. 275.

⁷ Ibid., p. 239.

⁸ Ibid., p. 278.

⁹ Ibid., p. 273.

¹⁰ Leroy, E. Lomeker, *Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz: Philosophical Papers and Letters*, The Univ. of Chicago Press, Chicago 1956, pp. 7-17.

incomprehensible, Leibniz clearly did not. On the contrary, he found much of value in Scotus' works. Due to the similarity of the notions of the two men, Leibniz's discussion of God's knowledge helps to illuminate Scotus' writings.

In *Theodicy* Leibniz lists two difficulties intrinsic to revealed religions that he thought needed to be addressed¹¹. The first is the apparent incompatibility between man's freedom and the activities of the divine nature; the second is that God seems to participate too directly in evil. This second is, of course, the problem of evil. Leibniz's discussion of the problem of evil is both provocative and innovative, anticipating many of the arguments made by contemporary writers. The *Theodicy* also offers, primarily in its first section and subsequent appendices, an extended treatment of the first problem, the compatibility of human freedom and God's omniscience.

Leibniz had obviously studied extensively the dispute between the Dominicans and the Jesuits on the issue of man's freedom. He often refers to this debate and frequently invokes the writings of its principals: Luis de Molina (1535-1600) and Dominic Banes (1528-1604). His own views on the debate are concentrated in paragraphs thirty-nine to forty-nine of the *Theodicy* and, as we shall see, these views are colored by Leibniz's own solution to the problem.

Having summarized the debate and listed Molina's three types of divine knowledge, Leibniz divides the debaters into two groups¹². On the one side is the Jesuit Molina, and his disciples. According to this group, God knows what free men would do of their own accord if placed in various circumstances. This type of knowledge is not to be confused with God's knowledge of possibilities (knowledge of mere intelligence) or with His knowledge of actuals (knowledge of intuition). Rather, the conditional knowledge (middle knowledge) is mediate between these two and is the basis upon which God knows the future free actions of free individuals. In the opposing group is the Dominican Banes, and his followers. Leibniz calls this group the 'predeterminators' because these men maintain that God knows future free actions through His predetermination of these actions.

In reviewing these two groups, Leibniz offers some criticisms of the two positions. We read the first criticism of the Molinists in these words: "For what foundation can God have for seeing what the people of Keilah would do? A simple contingent and free act has nothing in itself to yield a principle of certainty, unless one look upon it as predetermined by the decrees of God, and by the causes that are dependent upon them. Consequently the difficulty existing in actual free actions will exist also in conditional free actions..."¹³.

The criticism is clear and right. If the actual free actions can be known only through predetermination, possible free actions can also be known only through predetermination. Hence, explaining God's knowledge of future, actual free actions by means of future possible actions will not be helpful. Leibniz evidently takes this line of reasoning to be an effective critique of the Molinist position.

¹¹ Leibniz, *Theodicy*, par. 1.

¹² Ibid., pars. 39-40.

¹³ Ibid., par. 41.

The second criticism of the Molinists centers on the Molinist doctrine of freedom. Leibniz claims that Molina and his followers identify freedom with the liberty of indifference¹⁴. On Leibniz's understanding, this principle is the claim that, for an agent to be free relative to a certain action, the agent must be equally disposed towards the action and its opposite. Of course, this is a misunderstanding of the liberty of indifference, for it is concerned with abilities and not dispositions. Thus Leibniz's dismissals of the doctrine lack force. His claim that it is an empirical fact that agents are not equally disposed towards actions and their opposites does not challenge the liberty of indifference. This is also true for his contention that the doctrine runs afoul of his principle of sufficient reason. According to this principle, there must be an explanation for all actions. If an agent is equally disposed towards two alternatives, on Leibniz's account, there can be no explanation for his choice. As it can be seen obviously, Leibniz is here making the implausible assumption that only dispositions can enter into explanations of actions. Even more puzzling is his claim that the liberty of indifference conflicts with his principle of the identity of indiscernibles (if two entities have all the same properties, they must be same entity). Leibniz thinks that an agent can be equally disposed towards two options only if the options were completely identical; but then they would be one rather than two¹⁵.

Leibniz's criticism of the second group –the predeterminators- does not undermine the basic predeterminist claim that God knows future free actions only through His predetermination of these actions. His criticism of the predeterminators is that they posit that God must constantly interact with creatures to predetermine their actions¹⁶. This claim is unacceptable to Leibniz. In his opinion, God has set forth all that is necessary for the operation of the world, so that He need not intervene to keep the world functioning. Leibniz endorses this claim so strongly that elsewhere in his works he claims that miracles, defined as unplanned and mysterious interventions by God, do not occur¹⁷.

We must say here something about Leibniz's view on God's knowledge of future contingents. In several of the letters he exchanged with Arnauld concerning his *Discourse on Metaphysics*, Leibniz affirms that possibilities, as logical constructs, are independent of God's will¹⁸. He expresses this point in terms of different possible Adams that God could have created. God, in fact, created one Adam. This is the one whose actions are recorded in the Bible, whose progeny includes all men, and whose actions caused the expulsion from the Garden of Eden and the stain of original sin on all his descendants. There were, however, other Adams that God could have created. For instance, He could have created an Adam who did not eat the fruit and who remained in the Garden of Eden. Each of these variations on Adam represents, for Leibniz, a possible Adam. They differ from the Adam of the Bible in that they are possibilities

¹⁴ Ibid., par. 46.

¹⁵ Cp. Parkinson, G. H., "Leibniz on Human Freedom" in *Studia Leibnitiana*, Franz Steiner Verlag GMBH, Weisbaden 1970, p. 49.

¹⁶ Leibniz, *Theodicy*, par. 47.

¹⁷ Ibid., par. 54.

¹⁸ For example, in his letter of May 1686 printed in *Leibniz: Discourse on Metaphysics, Correspondence with Arnauld, Monadology*, Open Court Publishing Co., Chicago 1902, pp. 103f.

only; God did not choose to make them actual. Leibniz claims that each of these possible Adams has associated with him ‘a complete individual concept’. This individual concept consists of the notions of all the actions the being would perform if made actual. It is a complete lifestory of the individual. When God creates the Adam of the Bible, He chooses, from a number of complete lifestories, the lifestory with which we are familiar from the Bible. Since God knows the content of the lifestories of all creatures, He knows, at the same time, all that the Adam of the Bible would do in his lifetime.

The lifestories from which God chooses are independent of God in the sense that He does not determine their content. For example, God does not determine that the Adam of the Bible would choose to eat of the fruit or would have a wife named Eve. Nor does He determine that a possible but unactualized Adam would be an individual who, if created, would not have eaten of the fruit. As possible lifestories, these lifestories are merely combinations of possible actions, limited only by consistency and the rules of logic. Hence, the lifestories are, in a sense, ready-made and present to God. His function is merely to choose which of all the possible lifestories to make actual. Leibniz does not, of course, think that only Adam has a complete lifestory. According to Leibniz, every being is associated with a complete individual concept. Moreover, God knows all the complete individual concepts associated with every possible being. He also knows all the possible combinations of possible beings, and Leibniz talks about this as God’s knowledge of all possible worlds. These possible worlds are also independent of God in the sense that their contents are determined purely by consistency and logical rules. God’s activity is only to choose, from among these possible worlds, one possible world to make actual.

Leibniz’s views about complete, individual concepts and possible worlds have a central place in his philosophical system. For example, his views on these matters are closely tied to his solution of the mind-body problem, the doctrine of pre-established harmony¹⁹. We learn from this doctrine that the mind and body do not directly influence one another, but are mutually independent. Nevertheless, whatever happens to the body is reflected in the mind, so that an agent can know what happens to his body because the soul contains within it the lifestory of the body with which it is associated. Through the lifestory the agent in question knows what happens to his body without the body actually influencing the soul. If there were no complete individual concepts and no one to ensure that the proper lifestories are harmonized with the proper souls, there would be no guarantee that the soul would reflect the functions of the body.

In addition, Leibniz’s views about individual complete concepts and possible worlds are essential to his solution to the problem of God’s knowledge of future contingents. Since God knows all the contents of every possible world, He knows what any possible creature would do in any circumstance. He would know, for example, that in a certain possible world a mountain named “X” would erupt in “Y” time. Since God also knows what possible world He chooses to make actual, i.e., our possible world, He knows what future contingents actually occur.

¹⁹ Leibniz, *Theodicy*, par. 80.

So, Leibniz's solution seems very similar to what the Molinists term 'middle knowledge'. Leibniz did think that there was much truth in the Molinist position; but his position differs markedly from that of the Molinists. The Molinists fail to explain how it is that God knows what an agent would do in the future; they merely appeal to God's supercomprehension. Leibniz, on the other hand, explains how God knows the future actions. In effect, God knows the properties that a possible being has. For example, Mount St. Helen has the property of erupting in 1990. This, together with many other properties, constitutes its complete lifestory. Since a creature has such properties, the creature acts in accord with the content of these properties. Since God knows all the properties possessed by any possible creature, He knows what all actual creatures would do in the future. No doubt, this theory of how God knows future contingents is similar to that posited by Scotus. As it is known, Scotus held that God knows all possible states of affairs through His intellect alone prior to choosing one possible, consistent set to make actual. He also held that God would know fully everything about the possibles He chooses to make actual, and that God would thus know all future events in the actual world.

Seeing that Leibniz knew of Scotus' discussion of God's knowledge of future contingents, the similarity between Scotus' and Leibniz's views must not be surprising. Leibniz mentions Scotus several times in *Theodicy*. Here he talks about Scotus' rejection of Aristotle's dictum whereby all that exists, exists of necessity while it exists²⁰. Later in the same work, he cites Scotus' claim that if there no freedom in God, there would be no freedom in creatures²¹. These passages suggest a familiarity with Book I, distinctions 38 and 39 of Scotus' *Commentary on the Sentences*, in which Scotus discusses the problem of future contingents. Further, in the appendix to the *Theodicy* entitled "Summary of the Controversy Reduced to Formal Arguments", Leibniz indicates that he has read Book I, distinction 47, question 11 of Scotus' *Commentary*²². Finally, in his early work *De Principio Individui*, Leibniz discusses Scotus' views on the principle of individuation²³. It is beyond question, then, that Leibniz knew Scotus' work and, so, he was to a considerable extent influenced by his writings.

Since Leibniz's solution to the problem of future contingents is so similar to Scotus', one would expect it to exhibit similar defects. Leibniz's solution, like Scotus', seems to compromise the freedom of free agents. Leibniz foresaw this point and made these remarks in the *Theodicy*: "Since, moreover, God's decree consists solely in the resolution He forms, after having compared all possible worlds, to choose that one which is the best, and bring it into existence together with all that this world contains, by means of the all-powerful word *Fiat*, it is plain to see that this decree changes nothing in the constitution of things: God leaves them as just as they were in the state of mere possibility, that is, changing nothing either in their essence or nature, or even in their accidents, which are represented perfectly already in the idea of this possible

²⁰ Ibid., par. 132.

²¹ Ibid., par. 337.

²² Ibid., p. 383.

²³ *Leibniz: Philosophical Writings*, ed. G. H. Parkinson, J. M. Dent, London 1973, p. 244.

world. Thus that which is contingent and free remains no less so under the decrees of God than under His prevision”²⁴.

The point stressed in this long quotation is that God does not, by creating them, cause creatures to do what they do. On the contrary, He merely allows them to exist and do what they would do according to the contents of their complete individual concepts. Thus, God’s creative act is not deterministic.

Leibniz is right, of course, in saying that on his scheme God’s actualization of creatures does not determine their actions. But he wants further to maintain that at least some of the creatures God creates are free, e.e., human beings. This statement is valid, however, only if at least some of the creatures God creates are free prior to God’s creative act. If all creatures are determined independently of God’s creative activity, then, even if God’s creative act is not deterministic, God could not create free creatures. In particular, for Leibniz to think that God can create free creatures, he must assume that creatures are not determined by virtue of the existence of complete individual concepts.

An examination of the literature reveals a lack of unanimity about Leibniz’s definition of ‘freedom’. Some scholars claim, on the one hand, that he identifies freedom with logical contingency; but others regard him as equating freedom with the liberty of spontaneity. There is, in fact, evidence for both positions.

Leibniz claims in a number of places that there are at least two distinct types of necessity: Absolute (sometimes called logical) necessity and hypothetical necessity. Something is absolutely necessary if it cannot be otherwise or, equivalently, if its negation is a logical contradiction. For example, that everything is identical to itself is a necessary proposition since its negation would be self-contradictory. On the other hand, something is hypothetically necessary if it is necessary given certain conditions. For example, given that George is a bachelor, it is necessary that he be unmarried. It is not absolutely necessary that he be unmarried since, obviously, he could be married. Given that he is a bachelor, however, it then is necessary that he be unmarried. From these characterizations, it is clear that everything that is only hypothetically necessary is logically contingent. That is, the hypothetically necessary will not occur if the conditions necessitating it do not obtain.

We read several passages in Leibniz’s writings indicating that he regards only absolute necessity as inconsistent with freedom and that he regards what is only hypothetically necessary as free²⁵. Of course, if Leibniz does identify freedom with the absence of absolute (logical) necessity, it would be obvious why he does not regard his analysis of God’s knowledge as in conflict with the future free actions of agents. Since God is free to choose among an infinity of possible worlds, for any choice God makes He could have chosen otherwise. Thus, no action a creature performs is logically necessary even if a notion of it is contained in the complete individual concept associated with the creature.

²⁴ Leibniz, *Theodicy*, par. 52.

²⁵ For example, *Theodicy*, par. 37 and p. 273. Also compare Parkinson’s remark in *Leibniz: Philosophical Writings*, p. 24.

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