

Descartes and Leibniz on Human Free-Will and the Ability to Do Otherwise

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Both Descartes and Leibniz are on record as maintaining that acting freely requires that the agent 'could have done otherwise.' However, it is not clear how they could maintain this, given their other metaphysical commitments. In Leibniz's case, the arguments connected with this are well-rehearsed: it is argued, for example, that Leibnizian doctrines such as the Principle of Sufficient Reason and the thesis that God must will the best possible world preclude that the human could ever do other than she did.¹ The question of whether Descartes can maintain that the agent is able to do otherwise in the face of his wider metaphysical commitments has received comparatively little attention. However, Chappell has recently noted that Descartes's thesis that God is the 'total cause' of everything seems to preclude the possibility of human freedom (where this includes the ability to do otherwise).²

1 Such views are delineated, for example, in Robert Adams, *Leibniz: Determinist, Theist, Idealist* (Oxford: Oxford University Press 1994); David Blumenfeld, 'Freedom, Contingency and Things Possible in Themselves,' *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* 49(1) (1988) 81-101; C.D. Broad, 'Leibniz's Predicate-in-Notion Principles and Some of its Alleged Consequences' in *Leibniz: A Collection of Essays* (New York: Anchor 1972), 1-18; Lois Frankel, 'Being Able to do Otherwise: Leibniz on Freedom and Contingency,' *Studia Leibnitiana* 15:1 (1984) 45-59; Benson Mates, *The Philosophy of Leibniz* (Oxford: Oxford University Press 1986).

2 Vere Chappell, 'Descartes's Compatibilism,' in *Reason, Will and Sensation: Studies in Descartes's Metaphysics*, John Cottingham, ed. (Oxford: Clarendon Press 1994) 177-91

This paper compares a particular attempt by Leibniz to reconcile his wider metaphysics with the human agent's ability to do otherwise, with an attempt by Descartes to do the same which involves similar moves. It begins with a brief exploration of Leibniz's and Descartes's respective accounts of free-will, and how their claims that the free agent is 'able to do otherwise' apparently conflict with their other metaphysical commitments. I then examine a fairly prominent attempt by Leibniz to defend this ability to do otherwise, centering on the claim that the agent is able to do otherwise insofar as she has alternatives that are 'possible-in-themselves.' An apparently insignificant Cartesian defense of the ability to do otherwise is then considered, and I show that this defense follows a similar strategy. Finally, it is argued that this particular kind of defense is ultimately unsuccessful for Leibniz, but may be more successful for Descartes.

I Leibniz on the ability to do otherwise

In the *Theodicy*, Leibniz lists three conditions that must obtain for there to be human freedom: intelligence, which involves 'knowledge of the object of deliberation'; spontaneity, which 'belongs to us insofar as we have within us the source of our actions'; and contingency, where this involves that a claim that 'agent A wills that X' is not a metaphysically or logically necessary truth.³

We may look more closely at the third requirement of contingency. For Leibniz, a proposition is necessary⁴ iff its denial is a contradiction. Thus, the proposition

3 G.W. Leibniz, T, 303 [Abbreviations: AG = G W Leibniz: *Philosophical Essays*, trans. Roger Ariew and Daniel Garber (Indianapolis: Hackett 1989); L = G.W. Leibniz: *Philosophical Papers and Letters*, 2 vols., trans. Leroy E. Loemker (Chicago: University of Chicago Press 1956); T= Leibniz: *Theodicy*, trans. E.M. Huggard (Chicago and La Salle: Open Court 1990)]

4 Leibniz draws a well-known distinction between claims that are absolutely necessary (by which he means that their denial is a contradiction), and claims which are necessary *ex hypothesi* (where such claims are for Leibniz contingent). In this paper, I have not invoked the distinction between absolute necessity and necessity *ex hypothesi* — partly for considerations of length, partly because Leibniz's views on what necessity *ex hypothesi* is may be open to different treatments, but mostly because the distinction does no useful work in the argument I am making. In this paper, I hold that a claim to the effect that 'Agent A wills that X' is necessary insofar as its denial is a self-contradiction; it is contingent insofar as it is established that the agent could have done otherwise than she did. The arguments of this paper then rely on the following opposition:

(1) Agent A wills that X

is necessary if there are no conditions under which it is true that

(2) \sim (Agent A wills that X).

Now (1) would not be necessary if agent A need not have existed. If agent A need not have existed, then (2) would be possibly true — in which case (1) would be contingent. However, the agent's possible non-existence does not by itself satisfy Leibniz's contingency requirement in respect of human freedom. In the *Discourse on Metaphysics*, Leibniz declares that freedom involves that 'the will has the power to act otherwise or to suspend its action completely.'⁵

There are thus two senses in which Agent A's willing of X is a contingent act. In the broader sense, the act is contingent insofar as a denial of (1) is not a self-contradiction. In this sense, contingency is satisfied either by the agent's possible non-existence or the agent's being able to do otherwise. In the narrower sense, the act is contingent insofar as the agent is able to do otherwise than she did. The Leibnizian contingency requirement for freedom is satisfied *only if* the act is contingent in this narrower sense. For Leibniz, then, human freedom requires intelligence, spontaneity and the ability to do otherwise. (When I refer henceforth to the contingency requirement for freedom, I mean specifically the narrower requirement that the agent is able to do otherwise.)

A key difficulty for Leibniz's account of human freedom is that it is not clear how the Leibnizian free agent could fulfill the contingency requirement for freedom. The first obstacle in this connection comes from Leibniz's views concerning the relation of will to intellect. To understand clearly the difficulty here, it is useful to locate Leibniz's account of freedom within the context of two key and opposing accounts of freedom, made prominent in the medieval debates on free-will.⁶

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- (a) If it is necessary that an agent A wills that X, then it is not contingent (in the sense I've ascribed).
 - (b) If it is contingent that agent A wills that X (i.e. agent A had the ability to do otherwise), then it is not necessary.

5 AG 61

6 Both Descartes and Leibniz were evidently well-acquainted with the issues involved in these debates. See, e.g., Chappell, 'Descartes's Compatibilism'; Anthony Kenny, 'Descartes on the Will' in *Descartes*, John Cottingham, ed. (Oxford: Oxford University Press 1998), 132-59; Michael J. Murray, 'Leibniz on Divine Foreknowledge of Future Contingents and Human Freedom,' *Philosophy and Phenomenological*

On one side of the debate, the intellectualists (led by Dominicans such as Banez and Bellarmine) maintained that the will is always determined to choose what the intellect apprehends to be the best course of action. The final outcome of deliberation by the intellect is commonly called the 'last practical judgment,' and the intellectualists held that the will is always determined in its choice by this last practical judgment of the intellect. Thus, they argued that freedom of will is compatible with the will being determined by the intellect.

In contrast, the voluntarists (led by Jesuits such as Suárez and Molina) held that freedom requires that the will is *not* determined to choose any particular outcome. That is, the will is free only in the case that, when the antecedent conditions prior to willing have been fully specified, it is still open to the agent to have done otherwise. The voluntarists thus held a very robust view of freedom (similar to that held by contemporary libertarians) in which the will is free only if it is not determined in its choices.

Leibniz's contingency requirement that the agent 'could have done otherwise' would clearly be satisfied if he had been a voluntarist. However, Leibniz was a strong critic of voluntarism. He pointed out that such voluntarism is untenable given his Principle of Sufficient Reason: if the choice of the will is not determined or brought about by antecedent conditions prior to the act of willing, then the requirement that that choice must have occurred for a sufficient reason would be violated.

Leibniz's own position is much closer to that of the intellectualists, insofar as he held that the human agent is always determined to will a particular outcome. However, he held that such determination may not always be by the intellect. For Leibniz, passions and confused perceptions can thwart judgments of practical understanding,⁷ and these may also determine human action. As mentioned earlier, Leibniz specified intelligence, or 'knowledge of the object of deliberation' as one of the conditions for human freedom. He elaborated that such knowledge or intelligence 'occurs in the actual use of reason.'⁸ For Leibniz, a free act is one in which reason is exercised in choosing the best option. Thus, an act that is determined by the passions or confused perceptions is not free;

Research 55 (1995) 75-108; Michael J. Murray, 'Intellect, Will and Freedom: Leibniz and His Precursors,' *Leibniz Society Review* 6 (1996) 25-60.

7 See, e.g., T 314

8 T 303. For a detailed consideration of the relation between freedom and reason in Leibniz, see, e.g., Pauline Phemister, 'Leibniz, Freedom of Will and Rationality,' *Studia Leibnitiana* 23 (1991): 25-39.

one that is determined by what the intellect or reason presents as the best choice is.

Given that a free act for Leibniz is one in which the will is *determined* by what reason presents as the best choice, it is not obvious how such a free act could also satisfy the contingency requirement that the agent 'could have done otherwise.' The Leibnizian agent who acts freely certainly would not have been 'able to do otherwise' in the sense required by the medieval voluntarist, who holds that this ability precisely requires that the act is *undetermined*. In what sense could Leibniz then have accorded the human agent an 'ability to do otherwise'?

Leibniz's second requirement for freedom is spontaneity, and this too seems to be in tension with his contingency requirement for freedom. For Leibniz, the notion of spontaneity is closely tied to his doctrine that every individual substance has a complete concept that expresses every proposition that holds true of her. Each individual substance or monad has 'within itself the source of its own action' because it spontaneously expresses its essence, without the help of any external stimulus. In doing so, it unfolds its own individual history in accord with its complete concept. This being so, every intellectual deliberation, every willing by the individual agent is an inexorable 'unfolding' of her essence. This being the case, it is hard to see how the agent could have done otherwise.

Again, Leibniz holds, *à propos* of the individual's complete concept, that if one or more of the propositions in the complete concept were to be false, the individual would no longer be the same one. Thus, if it were false that 'Caesar crossed the Rubicon,' the individual who failed to cross the Rubicon would not be Caesar, but a different individual (call him Caesar*). Clearly, then, Caesar could not have done otherwise in crossing the Rubicon, for anyone who did not cross the Rubicon would not be Caesar.

Finally, Leibniz's problems with the contingency requirement for human freedom are also in conflict with his views about God's nature. Leibniz holds that truths about God's nature are necessary, in much the same way that the eternal truths are necessary (*viz.*, their denial is a self-contradiction). Given that God's nature is necessarily what it is, it is necessary that God is all-good. From this it follows that it is necessary that God wills into being the best possible world (where Leibniz holds that what is best is determined according to laws of logic/rules of goodness independent of God's will). So it is necessary that this world, *qua* best possible world, exists, and that everything that occurs in this world occurs as it does. Thus, Caesar must have crossed the Rubicon. So he could not have done otherwise.

Leibniz's contingency requirement for free-will thus appears to come into sharp conflict with his other philosophical commitments. I now turn to Descartes's account of the ability to do otherwise, and explore how

his account comes into conflict with *his* wider philosophical commitments.

II Descartes on the ability to do otherwise

Before embarking on a discussion of the Cartesian agent's ability to do otherwise, a key difference between Descartes and Leibniz on the scope of the will needs to be noted. Descartes holds that the will plays a crucial role not only in the agent's pursuit or avoidance of various ends, but in the affirmation or denial of various speculative claims. On the Cartesian account, judgments concerning the truth or falsehood of such claims are acts of the will, wherein the will affirms or denies, or remains in suspension, when presented with a perception by the intellect. In contrast, Leibniz holds that the affirmation and denial of a perception is 'contained within' the perception itself.⁹ Affirmation and denial of speculative claims are thus functions of the intellect for Leibniz. It is only the pursuit or avoidance of perceived goods/evils that is a function of the will.

Bearing this in mind, we now consider whether, and in what sense, the Cartesian free agent is able to do otherwise. Descartes has sometimes been characterized as a strong voluntarist.¹⁰ At first blush, evidence for Descartes's alleged voluntarism may be thought to derive from the Fourth Meditation. There, Descartes accepts that the will is free in situations where 'there is no reason pushing [the will] in one direction or another.' In such situations, the will is 'inclined both ways' and is 'indifferent' between the alternatives.¹¹ The agent may then will one alternative rather than another, but clearly could have done otherwise. Descartes also accepts that the will is similarly 'indifferent' when the weight of reasons is towards one choice, but there are also reasons

9 See, e.g., T 314.

10 See, e.g., Brian Grant, 'Descartes, Belief and the Will,' *Philosophy* 51 (1976) 401-19.

11 AT 7:57-8, CSM 2: 40. [Citations of Descartes are from: *Oeuvres de Descartes*, Adam and Paul Tannery, eds. (Paris: J Vrin 1962) (cited as AT followed by volume no. and page no.); *The Philosophical Writings of Descartes*, Vols. 1 & 2, John Cottingham, Robert Stoothoff and Dugald Murdoch, eds. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 1985 & 1984) (cited as CSM followed by volume no. and page no.); *The Philosophical Writings of Descartes*, Vol. 3, John Cottingham, Robert Stoothoff, Dugald Murdoch and Anthony Kenny, eds. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 1991) (cited as CSMK, followed by page no.)]

against that choice.¹² In this case, too, Descartes accepts that the agent could have willed otherwise than she did. Descartes thus accepts in these cases that, even when all antecedent conditions prior to the act of willing have been specified, the agent could still have willed otherwise. One might then conclude that he is a voluntarist.

However, the above claims in the Fourth Meditation do not in themselves provide conclusive support that Descartes is a voluntarist. This is because Descartes makes clear in the Fourth Meditation that the freedom when the will is thus indifferent is the 'lowest grade of freedom.' In contrast, he argues, the will enjoys its greatest freedom when a clear and distinct perception of reason impels the will to affirm that perception (or deny its contrary). Of the clear and distinct *cogito*, he writes as follows:

During these past few days, I have been asking whether anything in the world exists, and I have realized from the very fact of my raising this question it follows quite evidently that I exist. *I could not but judge that something which I understood so clearly was true; but this was not because I was compelled so to judge by any external force but because a great light in the intellect was followed by a great inclination in the will.*¹³

Descartes's claim that he 'could not but judge' the *cogito* to be true is a claim that he could not have done otherwise in assenting to the truth of the *cogito*. Descartes thus indicates here that the agent can will freely and voluntarily, and yet be unable to will otherwise than she did. This receives confirmation from the Second Replies, where Descartes writes that 'the will of a thinking thing is drawn (*fertur*) voluntarily and freely, but *nevertheless inevitably (infallibiliter)*, towards a clearly known good.'¹⁴

Based on such texts, commentators such as Kenny have argued that, far from being a voluntarist, Descartes would hold that it is not necessary for freedom that one should be able to do otherwise.¹⁵ The ground for this claim is not that Descartes thinks that the will is *always* determined in its choices. As just mentioned, Descartes accepts that when the will is indifferent, it *is* able to do otherwise, and he also accepts that the will is free under these conditions. Rather, the ground for rejecting that Descartes is a voluntarist is that he accepts that there *sometimes* are situations

12 AT 7: 59, CSM 2:41

13 AT 7: 58-9, CSM 2:41, emphasis mine

14 AT 7:166, CSM 2:117, emphasis mine

15 Kenny, 'Descartes on the Will,' 132-59

(when one has a clear and distinct perception) in which it is true both that

- (1) the agent wills freely
- (2) the agent could not have done otherwise.

This being the case, Descartes cannot think that the agent's being able to do otherwise is a necessary condition for freedom.

Unfortunately, this reading is not easily reconciled with some other claims by Descartes. In *Principles* 1:37, Descartes writes:

It is a supreme perfection in man that he acts voluntarily, that is, freely; this makes him in a special way the author of his actions and deserving of praise for what he does. ... [W]hen we embrace the truth, our doing so voluntarily is much more to our credit than would be the case *if we could not do otherwise*.¹⁶

In the opening sentence of the passage above, Descartes equates acting voluntarily with acting freely. He then indicates that acting voluntarily requires that we 'could have done otherwise.' It follows that, for Descartes, it is a requirement of freedom that we could have done otherwise.

Further support for the view that Descartes thinks the ability to do otherwise is necessary for freedom is found in Letter 463, which indicates that the will is *not* necessitated by clear and distinct perceptions. In that letter, Descartes agrees that the will has a 'positive faculty of determining oneself to one or other of two contraries, that is to say, to pursue or avoid, to affirm or deny.' Significantly, he then adds:

Indeed, I think it has it not only with respect to those actions to which it is not pushed by any evident reasons on one side rather than on the other, but also with respect to all other actions; so that when a very evident reason moves us in one direction, although morally speaking we can hardly move in the contrary direction, absolutely speaking we can. For it is always open to us to hold back from pursuing a clearly known good, or from admitting a clearly perceived truth, provided we consider it a good thing to demonstrate the freedom of our will by so doing.¹⁷

Descartes points out here that it is 'always' possible to withhold pursuit of a clearly known good or assent of a clearly known truth. Descartes thus intimates here that the agent is *always* able to do otherwise. This is

16 AT 8A: 18-19, CSM 1:205, emphasis mine

17 AT 4: 173, CSMK: 245

consistent with his position in *Principles* 1:37 that the ability to do otherwise is necessary for human freedom.

Descartes's position in letter 463 and the *Principles* thus seems to go against his declared position elsewhere. Can this apparent inconsistency be resolved?

Kenny argues that the above two passages are consistent with the position that the ability to do otherwise is not necessary for Cartesian freedom. He points to a letter to Mesland in May 1644, where Descartes writes:

if we see very clearly that a thing is good for us, it is very difficult — and on my view, impossible, as long as one continues in the same thought — to stop the course of our desire [to pursue it]. But the nature of the soul is such that it hardly attends for more than a moment to a single thing; hence, as soon as our attention turns from the reasons which show us that the thing is good for us we can call up some other reason to make us doubt it, and so suspend our judgment, and even form a contrary judgment.¹⁸

In letter 463, Descartes had maintained that it is 'always open to the agent to hold back from pursuing a clearly known good.' Kenny points out that the letter to Mesland above makes clear that this can be done 'only by distracting one's attention; one cannot refrain from desiring a good clearly seen to be good.'¹⁹ It is because the will seldom 'attends for more than a moment to a single thing' that one may be distracted from assent to a clear and distinct perception. But as long as one's attention is *focused* on the clear and distinct perception, the will would be necessitated in a particular direction, and the agent could not have done otherwise.

The medieval voluntarist held that, when the antecedent conditions prior to willing have been fully specified, it is still open to the free agent to have done otherwise. But Descartes clearly holds that when the antecedent conditions prior to willing have been fully specified for a clear and distinct perception, the free agent could not have done otherwise. Thus, Kenny argues, Descartes would not think the ability to do otherwise is necessary for freedom. As he writes, Descartes does not require of a (free) act of the will that it 'should be avoidable.'²⁰

But the position Kenny arrives at does not seem entirely satisfactory. *Principles* 1:37 states that 'when we embrace the truth, our doing so voluntarily is much more to our credit than if we could not do otherwise.'

18 AT 7: 116-7, CSMK: 233-4

19 Kenny, 'Descartes on the Will,' 150

20 *Ibid.*, 139

This indicates that, even when we embrace the truth from our clear and distinct perceptions, we have to be able to do otherwise. (Otherwise, it would be less to our credit that we did so embrace it.) Again, letter 463 states that we may hold back from pursuing a clearly known good or assenting to a clearly known truth ‘provided we consider it a good thing to demonstrate the freedom of our will by so doing.’ Evidently then, we demonstrate the freedom of our will by holding back from pursuit of/assent to what is clearly known. But if our freedom of will is demonstrated by the ability *not* to pursue or assent to what is clearly known, the ability to do otherwise must be a *sine qua non* for freedom. Thus, Descartes clearly wants to maintain that, even in the case of clear and distinct perceptions, we must be able to do otherwise in order to be free. There seems to be a tension between Descartes’s claims here and what Kenny has correctly pointed out — viz., that Descartes does not think the ability to do otherwise as specified by the medieval voluntarist is necessary for freedom. Can this tension in Descartes’s position be resolved?

I will argue that it can. Descartes did in fact see some kind of ability to do otherwise as a necessary condition of freedom. He obviously did not think the ability to do otherwise specified by the medieval voluntarist was necessary for freedom, but he nevertheless required of the free agent that she be able to do otherwise in a robust sense. To understand the sense in which the ability to do otherwise is necessary for Cartesian freedom, we need to look again at the hard case of clear and distinct perception — in what way would the agent be ‘able to do otherwise’ when confronted with a clear and distinct perception?

To determine how the agent could have done otherwise, note first that Descartes clearly accepts that there is always a temporal gap — no matter how brief — between the clear and distinct perception of a truth/good, and the will’s affirmation/pursuit of that truth/good. He writes in the Fourth Meditation that, when one has a clear and distinct perception, this ‘great light of the intellect *is followed by* [the] great inclination of the will.’ Again, when one perceives clearly a good, the will is ‘drawn’ or brought towards (*fertur*) that good inevitably. This being so, it is in principle always possible for the agent to have a clear and distinct perception of a truth/good, and to shift attention to some other thought *before* the will affirms/pursues that truth/good. Thus, it is possible for the agent to do otherwise even in the case of clear and distinct perception — for it is possible for her *not* to affirm and *not* to pursue, by the expedient of shifting her attention almost immediately to some other thought *before* she affirms/pursues.

Descartes does of course accept, as he tells Mesland, that if one ‘continues’ [over some time] in the same clear perception of a good, then it would be ‘impossible’ to ‘stop the course of our desire’ towards

pursuit. One does not, however, *have* to continue in the same thought — it is possible to shift our focus to some other thought (such as the thought that it is a good to express our freedom of will by not pursuing the good in question).

Again, Descartes accepts that morally — or practically — speaking, it is near-impossible for us not to pursue a clearly known good or affirm a clearly known truth. As he mentions in letter 463, ‘one can *hardly* move in a contrary direction’ in such cases. (This is presumably because the temporal gap between clear and distinct perception and affirmation/pursuit would be miniscule, allowing little time for the agent to shift her attention and hence withhold affirmation/pursuit.) Nevertheless, ‘absolutely speaking,’ it is always possible for us to withhold affirmation/pursuit. So it is always possible in principle for us to do otherwise.

This interpretation not only makes good sense of letter 463 and *Principles* 1:37; it also accommodates those texts which apparently suggest that the agent is unable to do otherwise than will affirmation/pursuit in the case of clear and distinct truths/goods. For example, Descartes’s claim that the will of an agent ‘is drawn freely but nevertheless inevitably towards a clearly known good’ is in effect the following claim:

While one is focused on perceiving a clearly known good, the will is inevitably drawn towards (pursuit of) that good. The will is also free in being drawn towards that good insofar as the agent has (in principle) within herself the resources for stopping herself from pursuing that good.²¹

In short, Descartes holds that it is always possible — even in the case of clear and distinct perceptions — for a human agent to do otherwise, at least in the sense that she is never necessitated to will as she did. He can thus accept as a *sine qua non* of human freedom that the agent should always be ‘able to do otherwise.’

This ‘ability to do otherwise’ of the Cartesian agent of course differs from the ‘ability to do otherwise’ of the medieval voluntarist. According to the latter, the agent is free only in the case that, when the antecedent conditions prior to willing have been specified, the agent could still have

21 Similarly, Descartes’s Fourth Meditation claim, discussed earlier, that he ‘could not but judge’ that the *cogito* is true (AT 7:58-9, CSM 2:41) obviously involves a reference to what had occurred in the Second Meditation. As he writes, his questioning ‘over the past few days’ had led him to the certainty of his existence. As such, this claim refers to a context in which *Descartes’s mind had clearly been focused on a clear and distinct perception*. In such a context, he would have found that he ‘could not but judge’ that the *cogito* was true.

done otherwise. While this condition is satisfied by the Cartesian agent whose will is in a state of indifference, it is not satisfied by the Cartesian agent confronted with a clear and distinct perception. In the latter case, the agent can avoid pursuit/assent only by turning her attention away from the clear and distinct perception to some other thought. Thus, whereas the medieval voluntarist takes avoiding assent/pursuit to be possible regardless of the antecedent conditions, Descartes takes this (in the case of clear and distinct perceptions) to be possible only through changing the antecedent conditions. Insofar as this change follows from a turn of attention, it is presumably the product of an act of will. But crucially, Descartes seems to have thought that there is only a small window of opportunity for the exercise of this act. A choice is always free because this window of opportunity always exists. This makes Descartes's account robust. But because the window of opportunity does not exist for long, it is not as robust as medieval voluntarism. The will will be constrained by a clear and distinct perception if it does not act quickly.

In sum, Descartes has a pretty robust account of the free agent's ability to do otherwise. Regardless of whether the agent is indifferent between choices or drawn compellingly by a clear and distinct perception, there is a robust sense in which she could have done otherwise, insofar as she is never *necessitated* to will as she did. I shall henceforth refer to the Cartesian version of the robust ability to do otherwise as the robust_D ability to do otherwise.²²

22 At this point, it may be objected that the reading given above of Descartes's views on free-will may in fact presuppose ascribing an intellectualist position to Descartes. I had argued that the Cartesian agent is in principle able not to assent to a clear and distinct perception, by shifting to another thought (e.g. the thought that it is always a good to express our freedom of will by not assenting to it). But such a defense may assume that the will is determined in its choice by the last practical judgment of the intellect — whether this is the clear and distinct perception or the thought that replaces it.

The reply here is that Descartes does indeed hold that in the case of a clear and distinct perception, the will is inevitably drawn in one direction — so that if one keeps focused on this perception as the last practical judgment, one would be unable not to assent to it. But there is no reason to think that the thought which succeeds the clear and distinct perception is *also* a clear and distinct perception. For example, it is not obvious that 'It is always a good to exercise our freedom' is a clear and distinct perception. If the thought that succeeds a clear and distinct perception is not itself clear and distinct, then the will would not be determined by this last practical judgment. That is, the agent would be in a state of indifference with respect to this last thought, and could have willed otherwise. Thus, the reading I have offered of the Cartesian agent's robust_D ability to do otherwise does not presuppose an intellectualist position, in which every choice by the will is determined by the intellect.

Leibniz's position that a free act is one in which the will is determined by what the intellect presents as the best choice had led to this puzzle: how can an act that is free in this sense also be one in which the agent could have done otherwise? This is a difficulty that Descartes does not face. In letter 463, Descartes accepts that we can will to follow the course with 'the most reasons in its favor.' In so doing, we 'determine ourselves more easily' and may be said to have a kind of freedom. However, Descartes emphasizes that this 'freedom' is not to be confused with the freedom that we enjoy when we exercise our robust_D ability to do otherwise. As Descartes goes on to point out, we do not *need* to follow the course with the most reasons in its favor — it is always open to us to exercise our positive power to 'follow the worse although we see the better' (in the case of a clear and distinct perception, by shifting to some other thought).²³ Descartes holds that we may decide to allow our actions to be determined by reason and so be 'free' in the weaker sense, but this does not detract from the fact that the robust_D ability to do otherwise is required for *genuine* voluntariness and freedom. Genuine freedom involves that one always has the robust_D ability to do otherwise, even when reason points wholly in one direction.

Again, Descartes's views on spontaneity are also quite compatible with his position that freedom requires the robust_D ability to do otherwise. In letter 463, he writes that:

The things which others command us to do, and which we would not otherwise do spontaneously, we do less freely than the things which we are not ordered to do.²⁴

Descartes intimates here that an act that we do not do spontaneously is 'less free' than one which we do spontaneously: thus spontaneity is evidently a requirement of freedom. Again, it is evident from the passage above that Descartes holds that a spontaneous act is one that is not determined by external forces, such as others' commands. This is confirmed by the Fourth Meditation, where he claims that freedom includes

23 AT 4:174, CSMK: 245. This claim may suggest that Descartes was a (radical) voluntarist. However, as I have argued, that Descartes is such a voluntarist is ruled out by his claims in the Fourth Meditation and Second Replies. Instead, the claim, read sympathetically, is quite consistent with the robust_D ability to do otherwise that Descartes attributes to the free agent. Human free agents have the 'positive power to follow the worse although we see the better' insofar as they are never necessitated to do the better (or even the best). Even in the case of clear and distinct perceptions, such agents may 'follow the worse' by shifting their attention to some other thought.

24 AT 4:174, CSMK: 245

'that our inclinations are such that we do not feel we are determined by external force'²⁵

However, a key difference between Descartes and Leibniz is that the former does not think that spontaneity is to be understood in terms of the inexorable 'unfolding' of an individual substance's essence. Instead, in letter 463, he maintains that the freedom we enjoy when our choices are not necessitated by the intellect's deliberations is analogous to the freedom when our choices are not necessitated by external forces such as others' commands.²⁶ Spontaneity and the robust_D ability to do otherwise are two sides of the coin of freedom: for Descartes, an act is free insofar as it is not necessitated — whether by external forces or the internal deliberations of the thinker.

In contrast to Leibniz, Descartes's views on the relation of reason and spontaneity to freedom do not militate against the agent's robust_D ability to do otherwise. However, there are other aspects of Descartes's metaphysic that are in tension with this ability. These are mostly connected with the roles that the Cartesian God plays in the created universe. There are at least two key roles of God that may be considered in this connection.

First, according to Descartes's doctrine of continuous creation, God is not just the original creator of finite substances in the universe. He also sustains or keeps in being these finite substances, including the human thinker, for every moment of their existence. This may arguably militate against the human thinker's having a robust_D ability to do otherwise. If God causes the human thinker to exist in every moment of her existence, would not God also cause her every choice of the will? In that case, the human agent would neither be able to choose freely in the manner of the medieval voluntarist when the perception is not clear and distinct, nor choose freely when a perception is clear and distinct on whether to switch from this perception to another thought.

One possible way of avoiding this tension might involve applying Chappell's suggestion that the action of God is a necessary condition for the agent's choices, but not sufficient in itself to account for these choices.²⁷ But there are difficulties with such a response. In a letter to Elizabeth, Descartes claims that God is the 'total cause of everything' and that nothing could 'happen in the world without coming entirely (*en-*

25 AT 7:57, CSM 2:40

26 AT 4:174, CSMK:245

27 Chappell, 'Descartes' Compatibilism,' 190

tierement) from him.²⁸ Descartes's strong claim that everything that happens comes 'entirely' from God indicates that God's actions are sufficient for any occurrence (including the agent's choices) in the universe. Again, as Chappell himself points out, there are many passages in which Descartes 'uses the language of sufficiency in speaking of God's causal relation to created things, including free human volitions.'²⁹ Thus the tension between Descartes's views on the free agent's ability to do otherwise and on the role of God in sustaining the universe remain.

Apart from maintaining that God sustains the universe in every moment of its existence, Descartes also holds that God fore-ordains everything that happens in the universe. While Descartes's views on divine predestination have received relatively little attention in the secondary literature, they are indisputably an integral feature of his thought. *Principles* 1:40 is headlined thus: 'It is certain that everything was pre-ordained by God.'³⁰ Descartes goes on to point out that we will recognize that our human actions must be predestined by God when we (clearly and distinctly) understand the nature of divine power:

Now that we have come to know God, we perceive in him a power so immeasurable that we regard it as impious to suppose that we could ever do anything which was not already preordained by him.³¹

He makes a similar point when he tells Elizabeth:

Philosophy by itself [i.e. without any appeal to faith] is able to discover that the slightest thought could not enter a person's mind without God's having willed from eternity that it should so enter.³²

Descartes's views on divine predestination of human thought and action are evidently in tension with his claim that the free agent has the robust_D ability to do otherwise. If the agent was predestined from eternity to think and do as she did, she could not have done otherwise.

Descartes and Leibniz are thus similar in that their acceptance that an agent is 'able to do otherwise' apparently cannot be reconciled with their wider metaphysics. I now examine a prominent defense of 'the ability to

28 AT 7:48, CSM 2:49

29 Chappell, 'Descartes' Compatibilism,' 190

30 AT 8A:20, CSM 1 206

31 Ibid.

32 AT 4:314, CSMK:272

do otherwise' by Leibniz, before going on to show in Section IV that Descartes provides a defense of this ability that is similar in its strategy.

III Leibniz on that which is 'possible-in-itself'

Leibniz was well aware that there are difficulties in reconciling the contingency requirement for freedom with his other commitments, and he came up with various defenses purporting to show that contingency is possible within his wider system. I focus on just one of them. The defense I examine has been explored in some detail by David Blumenfeld,³³ and relies on the fact that Leibniz assigned a 'special sense' to the contingency requirement for freedom. Leibniz indicated that the requirement that the agent could have done otherwise is satisfied as long as there is an alternative to what the agent wills that is possible *in itself*. This is so even though the alternative is not possible in relation to things external to itself. Leibniz maintained that such a contingency requirement holds in respect of both God and human beings.

In the *Theodicy*, Leibniz considers this objection against God's being free:

- (1) Whoever cannot fail to choose the best is not free.
- (2) God cannot fail to choose the best.
- (3) Therefore God is not free.

Leibniz's reply is as follows:

I deny the major of this argument. Rather it is true freedom and the most perfect, to be able to make the best use of one's free-will. ... [Although God's] will is always indefectible and always tends towards the best, the evil or the lesser good which he rejects will still be possible in itself. Otherwise the necessity of good would be geometrical (so to speak) or metaphysical, and altogether absolute; the contingency of things would be destroyed, and there would be no choice.³⁴

Leibniz points out here that it would have been necessary for God to will this world into being if there were not alternatives to this world that are possible in themselves. But when God chose to actualize this world, he

33 I owe much of my discussion in this section to Blumenfeld's interesting paper, 'Freedom, Contingency and Things Possible in Themselves.'

34 T 386-7

had in mind other worlds that are possible in themselves — that is, that are free from contradiction and thus, considered in themselves, are actualizable. Given these alternative worlds, Leibniz holds that there is ‘choice’ and ‘contingency.’ Thus, he concludes, God acted freely in actualizing this world.

It is evident from this passage that he assigns a very specific interpretation to the contingency requirement for freedom. For Leibniz, God had the ‘choice’ to do otherwise in his actualization of this world, insofar as at the point of choosing, there were alternative worlds possible in themselves. Thus, the contingency requirement is satisfied although God could not have chosen to will these alternatives into being, given that God’s will is ‘indefectible.’

There are thus two perspectives from which we can examine Leibnizian divine contingency. The first perspective involves looking at divine contingency within the wider context of God’s necessary nature, which entails that he must will to actualize the best possible world. From this perspective, God was not free to choose to do otherwise than he did. The second perspective is to consider God at the point of choice, independent of the determinants which necessitate his will to a particular outcome. From this perspective, we see God simply as an agent faced with choices of various possible worlds. Considered apart from wider considerations that require God to will the best possible world, God is seen to have ‘choice’ and to have been able to do otherwise.

Leibniz holds that the human agent’s act is similarly contingent (that is, she could have done otherwise) insofar as there are alternatives to what she wills that are possible in themselves. This is so even if the alternatives are not possible in relation to the determinants that dictate her choices (where these determinants include what reason presents as the best choice, the agent’s place in the best possible world etc.)

Blumenfeld highlights a passage in which Leibniz writes, *à propos* of the point that God can anticipate everything that Caesar will do, that

whatever happens in conformity with these predeterminations is certain but not necessary and if one were to do the contrary, *he would not be doing something impossible in itself*, even though it would be impossible for this to happen.³⁵

Leibniz holds that an act is necessary in itself iff there are no alternatives that are possible in themselves. But he points out here that, if Caesar had done the contrary of crossing the Rubicon, he would not have done anything ‘impossible in itself,’ for there is no internal contradiction in

35 AG, 45, emphasis mine

the option of not crossing the Rubicon. Caesar's stopping at the Rubicon is an act that is possible in itself.

Here again, there are two perspectives we can adopt with respect to the actions of Caesar. First, we can examine Caesar's actions in relation to Leibniz's wider metaphysical commitments. From this perspective, it is clearly impossible that Caesar does not cross the Rubicon. Second, we can see Caesar apart from his complete concept, independent of his place in the best possible world and all the other determinants on his will. Here, Caesar's act of crossing the Rubicon is considered strictly in respect of Caesar himself at the point of choice. At the point when he reaches the Rubicon, Caesar has a variety of military choices — to cross the Rubicon, to stop there or to retreat. Insofar as there were these other alternatives, his crossing satisfies the contingency requirement for freedom.

There have been strong objections to this particular defense of contingency by Leibniz. Lovejoy makes the following criticism in respect of God's freedom:

When Leibniz says that, upon his principles, the opposite to the actual choice would not involve self-contradiction he confuses two things. The mere *concept* of the existence of any of the inferior and non-existent worlds is, by the hypothesis, free from contradiction, if taken by itself but it was absolutely impossible that it should be *selected* for existence, since this would contradict both the perfection of God and the very notion of voluntary choice.³⁶

Lovejoy's point is that the mere presence of non-contradictory 'alternatives' does not mean that the agent could freely choose. To illustrate: if a traveler faces a fork in the road, but it is necessary that she takes the left fork, then the presence of a right fork hardly establishes that she could have done otherwise!

One might respond, after the manner of Blumenfeld, that such a criticism of Leibniz is not quite fair, for it is simply Leibniz's *definition* of the contingency requirement that it is satisfied by the presence of alternative options possible-in-themselves (even if the agent could never take them). That the agent has such alternatives possible-in-themselves is what Leibniz *means* by contingency.

However, given that such is the sense that Leibniz accords to contingency, then it falls prey to an objection formulated by Robert Adams:

36 A.O. Lovejoy, *The Great Chain of Being: A Study of the History of an Idea* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press 1950), 173

We may object that the conception of contingent as that which has some alternative that is possible *in itself* does not really show how there can be any contingency in the Leibnizian universe, nor how God's choice among possible worlds can be free. For what is contingent in this Leibnizian sense may still be necessary by necessity of the consequent — that is, [logically] necessary — in the traditional (and twentieth-century) sense.³⁷

Adams's point is that if Leibniz defines contingency in terms of the presence of alternatives possible in themselves, then he does not succeed in showing that the agent is really able to do otherwise. It is still the case that when one takes into consideration the wider Leibnizian metaphysic the agent has to do as she does. An 'ability to do otherwise' that consists merely in the fact of being presented with alternatives that are possible in themselves is not appropriately described as an ability. It has nothing to do with what Leibniz's *Discourse on Metaphysics* described as my 'power to act otherwise or to suspend [my] action entirely' and so does nothing to establish that my actions are really free in the sense of freedom that involves an ability to do otherwise.³⁸

IV Descartes on that which is 'possible-in-itself'

Descartes's ascription of the 'ability to do otherwise' to humans runs, like Leibniz's, into criticisms that it is incompatible with his wider metaphysics — in particular, the central role played by God in the created universe as both pre-ordainer and continual creator of everything in this universe. However, Descartes does not think that this central role played by God precludes human freedom, including the robust ability to do otherwise.

In what follows, I will focus specifically on how Descartes attempts to reconcile human freedom with his views on divine pre-ordination, and show that he follows a similar strategy to that of Leibniz. I return briefly

37 Adams, *Leibniz: Determinist, Theist, Idealist*, 20. While Adams accepts that much of this criticism of the defense is correct, he points out that the defense helps make clear the difference between Leibniz's and Spinoza's necessitarianism.

38 Blumenfeld himself acknowledges this when he points out that Leibniz's conception of freedom is 'very weak and restricted,' and is 'compatible with an enormously powerful kind of necessity — the very kind, in fact that has troubled his critics most' ('Freedom, Contingency and Things Possible in Themselves,' 20). There are other criticisms of this defense, which I will not be examining here. (E.g., Blumenfeld and Adams both note that it is not evident that one can coherently consider the human agent apart from her complete concept, as this defense requires.)

to Descartes's doctrine of continuous creation towards the end of the paper.

Perhaps the most well-known of Descartes's attempts to reconcile human freedom with divine pre-ordination is that in the letter to Elizabeth of January 1646, which draws an analogy between God and king. This defense is generally thought unsatisfactory.³⁹ I will look instead at another, less-noticed defense that Descartes provides, which turns out to be similar to the Leibnizian defense examined above. In the Third Replies, Descartes writes, in response to Hobbes's criticism that he assumes the will is free without argument:

On the question of our freedom, I made no assumptions beyond what we all experience within ourselves. Our freedom is very evident by the natural light. ... There may indeed be many people who, when they consider the fact that God pre-ordains all things, cannot grasp how this is consistent with our freedom. But if we simply consider ourselves, we will all realize in the light of our own experience that voluntariness and freedom are one and the same thing.⁴⁰

Principles 1:37 equates freedom with voluntariness, and also maintains that voluntariness involves the robust_D ability to do otherwise. Here, Descartes acknowledges that one cannot see how God's preordination of 'all things' is compatible with human freedom. But he declares that if we examine ourselves as human individuals, we would know 'in the light of our own experience' that we have voluntariness, and hence freedom. Thus, Descartes accepts that we know from our experience that we always have voluntariness and the 'positive power' or robust_D ability to do otherwise.

There are obviously points in common between Descartes's defense of the 'ability to do otherwise' here and the defense by Leibniz we have just examined. Like Leibniz, Descartes holds that there are two perspectives that we can adopt with respect to human agents such as ourselves. First, we can see ourselves as part of a larger universe in which God has pre-ordained all things. Descartes accepts that from this perspective we are unable to grasp how human freedom and the ability to do otherwise is possible. However, there is a second perspective that we can adopt, in which we 'simply consider ourselves' as we are, divorced from the larger metaphysic. When we simply consider our own experiences, we know

39 See, e.g., Anthony Kenny, *The God of the Philosophers* (Oxford: Clarendon Press 1979), 78.

40 AT 7:191, CSM 2:134

that at the point of choice, we always had freedom and the robust_D ability to do otherwise.

Descartes's construal of the agent's 'ability to do otherwise' at the point of choice is admittedly quite different from Leibniz's construal. For the former, it is the ability of the agent to avoid having done as she did; for the latter, it is the presence of non-contradictory alternatives at the point of choice. Nevertheless, the *strategy* pursued by both Descartes and Leibniz is similar: both argue that, to understand how the human agent is 'able to do otherwise,' we need to consider the agent *per se* at the point of choice, independent of the determinants on her will. I now show that this strategy is effective in Descartes's case, but fails for Leibniz, and I explain why this is so.

V Leibniz's and Descartes's defenses of the ability to do otherwise

One key contrast between Leibniz and Descartes concerns their dissimilar views on the status of the laws of logic. For Leibniz, the laws of logic are pre-volitional in respect of God — the presence of such laws in the divine understanding is metaphysically prior to any acts of divine will. God's will is therefore constrained by these laws — for example, God could not will a round square into existence because this would violate the principle of contradiction.

In contrast, Descartes maintains that 'in God, knowing and willing are a single thing'⁴¹ — that is, there is no distinction between God's intellect and will. Thus, 'by the very fact of willing something [God] knows it and it is only for this reason that such a thing is true.'⁴² Again, he tells Mersenne that, 'from eternity [God] willed the eternal truths and by that very fact created them.'⁴³ For Descartes, then, the eternal truths are co-volitional in respect of God. Descartes also makes clear that the laws of logic are to be included among such eternal truths. As he tells Mesland, 'God cannot have been determined to make it true that contradictories cannot be true together, and therefore he could have done the opposite.'⁴⁴

41 AT 1: 149, CSMK: 24

42 Ibid.

43 AT 1: 152, CSMK: 25

44 AT 4: 118, CSMK: 235

Clearly, laws like the principle of contradiction are included among the eternal truths that only came into being when God willed them to be so.

Given that God has willed these laws to be as they are, human understanding is circumscribed by these laws — thus we are unable to conceive a round square because God willed as an eternal truth the principle of contradiction. Descartes emphasizes that human attempts to understand what things would be like independent of these laws of logic are doomed to failure. Responding to Gassendi on the issue of what humans grasp by the term ‘infinite,’ he writes that one needs to distinguish between ‘an understanding which is suited to the scale of our intellect’ and ‘a fully adequate conception of things’ — i.e., a conception of things which is independent of the circumscribed limits of the human intellect. Of the former, he writes that ‘each of us knows by his own experience that he has this sort of understanding of the infinite.’ Of the latter, he states baldly that ‘no one has this sort of conception of the infinite or of anything else.’⁴⁵

Descartes frequently reiterates that it is pointless to try and grasp what things are like independent of the laws of logic, because this would involve dealing with matters which are ‘beyond human grasp.’ Significantly, however, he also maintains that we have to accept certain truths, even if it is beyond human grasp *how* they could be true. In *Principles* 1:25, he writes

We must believe everything which God has revealed, even though it may be beyond our grasp.

... if God happens to reveal to us something about himself or others which is beyond the natural reach of our mind — such as the mystery of the Incarnation or of the Trinity — we will not refuse to believe it, despite the fact that we do not clearly understand it. And we will not be at all surprised that there is much, both in the immeasurable nature of God and in the things created by him, which is beyond our mental capacity.⁴⁶

How God can be three individuals and yet one is beyond the ‘natural reach of the human mind,’ for it apparently contravenes the laws of logic. However, we would still have to accept that God is a trinity. For Descartes, the clarity and transparency that marks a perception as indubitably true may come from either the natural light or divine grace.⁴⁷ In this

45 AT 7:365, CSM 2:252

46 AT 8A:14, CSM 1:201

47 AT 7: 148, CSM 2:105

case, the clarity of the perception that God is a trinity is given by divine grace. Thus we have to accept this, though we cannot conceive how it could be so.⁴⁸

Descartes does not hold that we should accept what contravenes the laws of logic only when it is a revelation of faith. He accepts that even those clear and distinct perceptions obtained via the natural light can lead us to perceive that something is the case, without being able to conceive how it could be so. This is particularly the case with respect to our clear and distinct perceptions of God and God's attributes. Descartes frequently iterates that, though humans can perceive clearly and distinctly God and God's attributes, they can never perceive them adequately, for their perceptions must conform to the 'scale' of the human intellect:

A finite mind cannot grasp [adequately] God, who is infinite. But that does not prevent [the finite thinker] having a perception of God, just as one can touch a mountain without being able to put one's arms around it.⁴⁹

Given that we cannot have an adequate grasp of God, Descartes accepts that we may clearly and distinctly perceive God to possess an attribute without grasping how this could be so. In the Third Meditation, Descartes mentions that the unity, simplicity and inseparability of the attributes of God is 'one of the most important of the perfections which I understand him to have.' He goes on to elaborate in the Second Replies:

our understanding tells us there is in God an absolute immensity, simplicity and unity which embraces all other attributes and has no copy in us... In virtue of this we recognize that, of all the individual attributes which, by a defect of our intellect, we assign to God in a piecemeal fashion, corresponding to the way in which we perceive them in ourselves, none belong to God and to ourselves in the same sense.⁵⁰

Thus Descartes accepts that our understanding may (clearly and distinctly) tell us that God has a simplicity that encompasses all other

48 It would be interesting to explore if the cases mentioned in this section can be accommodated by Bennett's account of Cartesian modality. See Jonathan Bennett, 'Descartes's Theory of Modality,' *Philosophical Review* 103 (1994): 639-67. Bennett sees Descartes as holding a self-contradictory proposition to be one that cannot be conceived as true by the human intellect — but Descartes clearly holds that there are propositions that we cannot conceive as true, but must accept as true.

49 AT 7: 210, CSM 2:273

50 AT 7:137, CSM 2:98

attributes, and yet that we are unable to understand how God may be simple in this way. This is because the unity of attributes in God 'has no copy in us.' Indeed, to the human mind, the claim that the various attributes are a simple unity seems contradictory, for the very differentiation into various attributes requires that the attributes are different and distinct from each other, and thus not a simple unity. Again, in virtue of this simplicity, none of God's attributes of power, knowledge etc. belong to God in the same sense that they belong to us. Thus, we are able to clearly and distinctly perceive that God has these attributes without being able to conceive how this could be so.

Thus in matters relating to God's attributes, we can have a clear and distinct perception (e.g. that God's attributes are a simple unity) that is apparently self-contradictory. But one may object that this is downright puzzling, as it goes against Descartes's general position on clear and distinct perception.

Descartes is emphatic that what is clear and distinct cannot be self-contradictory. As he points out, 'Self-contradictoriness in our concepts arises merely from ... obscurity and confusion: there can be none in the case of [those that are] clear and distinct.'⁵¹ Again, he holds that what is clear and distinct is determined to be so according to the finite standards that govern both the created universe and the bounds of our human minds. But if the perception that God's various attributes are unitary is self-contradictory when understood by finite human standards, does this not imply that the perception is therefore not clear and distinct (indeed is obviously false)? Yet Descartes evidently thinks that the perception of the unity of God's attributes *is* clear and distinct.

The apparent inconsistency may be resolved as follows. We can compare the claim that 'God's attributes are unitary' with a claim such as '(2+3=5)'. Descartes would accept the latter to be self-contradictory. This is because the rules of mathematics *can* be grasped adequately by a finite human understanding — indeed, they are among the laws that God willed to structure our finite understanding. Thus, any claim that breaks these laws is, by definition, one that finite humans would consider self-contradictory. In contrast, Descartes thinks God's nature cannot be grasped fully by a finite understanding. This being so, Descartes would maintain that some claims concerning God and God's attributes — e.g. the Trinity, God's simplicity — may *seem* to be self-contradictory. What this shows, however, is that these claims are *ungraspable* by our finite

51 AT 7: 152, CSM 2:108

human understanding — not that they *really* are self-contradictory. (It is only claims that contravene the humanly graspable eternal truths, such as the truths of mathematics and laws of logic, that *are* self-contradictory.) Thus Descartes can accept that some of our perceptions of God's attributes have a semblance of being self-contradictory — yet are clear and distinct according to our finite understanding.

Let us look at Descartes's defense of his position of the compatibility of freedom and pre-ordination in the Third Replies in the light of the above. As mentioned, Descartes accepts that we cannot 'grasp' how human freedom, including the robust_D ability to do otherwise, is compatible with God's pre-ordination of events in the universe. However, we know from our own experience that we are able to do otherwise, and this is enough to ensure that we can do so.

We can now see that there is some plausibility to this defense. Descartes accepts that, in matters related to God and his attributes, what *seems* self-contradictory is instead merely ungraspable by human intellect. Thus, as he points out in the Third Replies, it may well be that we 'cannot grasp how [God's pre-ordination] is compatible with our human freedom [where this includes the robust_D ability to do otherwise].' However, this does not mean that God's pre-ordination is really inconsistent with such freedom, only that God's powers in this respect are beyond human grasp.

In *Principles* 1:41, Descartes makes a second, more precise attempt at delineating this defense of free-will:

VI *How to reconcile the freedom of our will with divine pre-ordination.*

But we shall get out of [our difficulties here] if we remember that our mind is finite, but the power of God is infinite.... We may attain sufficient knowledge of this power to perceive clearly and distinctly that God possesses it; but we cannot get a sufficient grasp of it to see how it leaves the free actions of men undetermined. Nonetheless, we have such close awareness of the freedom which is in us, that there is nothing we can grasp more evidently or more perfectly. And it would be absurd, simply because we do not grasp one thing, which we know by its very nature must be beyond our comprehension, to doubt something else of which we have an intimate grasp and which we experience within ourselves.⁵²

Descartes maintains that one can clearly and distinctly perceive that God possesses the attribute of infinite power without grasping the nature of that attribute, for we are unable to understand how the exercise of such infinite power is able to leave 'the free actions of men undetermined.'

52 AT 8A:20, CSM 1:206

From our perspective, it appears self-contradictory that God's infinite power can determine the events in the universe, and yet humans actions can be free and undetermined. However, this semblance of contradiction merely indicates that the nature of God's infinite power is beyond the 'natural reach' of our minds. It is pointless to try to grasp adequately such infinite power. Instead, we grasp 'perfectly' — that is, clearly and distinctly — that we have freedom and the robust_D ability to do otherwise, and that should suffice to assure us that we have them.

The defense offered by Descartes to resolve the tension between pre-ordination and human freedom could also be plausibly be applied to resolve any possible tension between human freedom and Descartes's doctrine of continuous creation. That is, Descartes might plausibly claim that we do indeed clearly and distinctly perceive God's infinite power sufficiently to know that God 'entirely' sustains the human thinker for every moment of her existence, and yet fail to grasp how this sustaining power leaves our free actions undetermined. Once again, this inability indicates only that the nature of this power is beyond the natural reach of our minds. Our clear and distinct perception that we are free and have the robust_D ability to do otherwise is sufficient to assure us we are free and are able to do otherwise.

I've suggested that this Cartesian defense of the ability to do otherwise has some plausibility. But it was shown in Section III that Leibniz's appeal, which adopts what is essentially the same strategy, is often held to be an unconvincing defense of human contingency. I end this paper by examining why Leibniz's defense fails where Descartes's might just succeed.

This has to do with Leibniz's and Descartes's differing views on the relationship between the laws of logic (and more generally, the eternal truths) and what God can do. Leibniz holds that the presence of these laws of logic in the divine understanding is metaphysically prior to God's will, and that what God can do is governed by these laws. That is to say, what God wills is governed by the same laws of logic that govern the created universe, as well as the thought of created human thinkers. God could not will a round square by virtue of the same laws that make it impossible for a round square to ever exist, and impossible for us to conceive that round square. For Leibniz, then, God and his created universe are both governed by the same laws of logic, and moreover, they are *recognized* by humans to be governed by these laws.

In contrast, the Cartesian laws of logic (and eternal truths) govern the created universe, and form the limits of human thought. However, Descartes makes clear that they do not provide the limits to what God can do — only the limits to what humans can know about what God can do. For Descartes, what God can do exceeds the grasp of humans bound by the laws of logic.

When brought to bear on their defenses that the free agent is able to do otherwise, this difference is significant. For both Leibniz and Descartes, there are, as mentioned, two perspectives from which we can approach the free agent's ability to do otherwise — viz., either with respect to the wider metaphysics and divorced from such metaphysics.

For Descartes, the main tension lies between free-will (which includes robust_D ability to do otherwise) and God as the pre-ordainer and sustainer of this universe. But Descartes makes clear that humans can never adequately comprehend the infinite power(s) of God. This being so, the first perspective -wherein we consider freedom and the robust_D ability to do otherwise in relation to the wider metaphysic and God's powers — must lie beyond our human grasp. But the Cartesian agent knows, independent of any wider metaphysic, that she is genuinely able to choose otherwise. This is all that she needs in order to establish that her actions are free and contingent. Any further attempt to reconcile such freedom and robust_D ability to do otherwise with God's infinite power(s) would involve a futile attempt to grasp the humanly ungraspable.

In contrast, no aspect of the Leibnizian metaphysic is beyond human grasp, God and the created universe being subject to the same laws of logic that regulate our human understanding.⁵³ Thus, if one finds a logical incompatibility between the ability to do otherwise and any aspect of this metaphysic (e.g. God's necessary nature, the Principle of Sufficient Reason etc.), Leibniz does not have the recourse of claiming that such incompatibility is simply due to our being unable to grasp adequately the relevant metaphysical aspect. This being the case, Leibniz is faced with a genuine irreconcilability between his necessitarian metaphysics and any robust ascription of the ability to do otherwise to humans. The result is that he is left with the much attenuated and unconvincing account of contingency and freedom we have seen.

In sum, Descartes and Leibniz share a common strategy in their attempt to defend the ability of the human agent to do otherwise. However, because of their differing views of the status of the laws of logic, Leibniz's defense turns out to be less convincing than Descartes. One thing that this may suggest is that theologians seeking to defend free-will in the face of divine pre-ordination might be better off accepting

53 Of course, there are aspects of God's willing that the finite human mind is unable to understand — for instance, why this world as it is is the best possible. But the *laws* of logic themselves by which God determines this to be the best possible world are comprehensible to humans.

the Cartesian, rather than the Leibnizian (or Aquinian) version of divine omnipotence.⁵⁴

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