

Divine Faculties and the Puzzle of Impossibility

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Abstract Leibniz maintains that even though God's intellect contains all possibles, some of these possibles are not compossible. This impossibility of some possibles is supposed to explain which collections of possibles are possibles worlds and why God does not actualize the collection of all possibles. In order to fully understand how this works, we need to establish what precisely Leibniz takes to be the source of impossibility, that is, which divine attribute or faculty gives rise to the impossibility of certain possibles. Different interpretations answer this question in different ways. This chapter explores the role that God's faculties play on some of the standard interpretations of Leibniz's notion of impossibility and argues that we are faced with a dilemma: even though impossibility must somehow arise from God's faculties, none of the faculties usually distinguished seems up to the task. To escape this dilemma, we need to revise the traditional understanding of the divine faculties. More specifically, we need to recognize wisdom as an attribute that is distinct from intellect, power, and will and that is the source of impossibility.

1 Introduction

The attributes of Leibniz's God comprise all perfections, but Leibniz frequently describes three divine attributes or faculties in particular: intellect, will, and power. The distinction between these three faculties, and the fact that they are governed by different principle or have different objects, is supposed to help explain, among other things, why God did not actualize a different collection of possibles even though he had the power to do so, and hence why he created freely rather than necessarily. This description already suggests that the distinction between these faculties is closely linked to the puzzle of impossibility. In fact, different solutions to this puzzle that have been put forward locate the source of impossibility in different divine faculties. It is my goal in this chapter to investigate the connection between the divine faculties and the puzzle of impossibility more closely and to argue that what Leibniz says about the divine faculties both illuminates and is illuminated by what he says about

impossibility. Taking seriously the roles that the faculties are meant to play in Leibniz's system casts doubt on certain proposals for solving the impossibility problem, and conversely, examining his notion of impossibility provides us with new insights into the workings of the divine faculties. After a preliminary look at how Leibniz describes God's attributes, I will investigate where in the divine mind one may be able to locate the source of impossibility and what constraints Leibniz's account of the divine attributes might place on solutions to the problem of impossibility. Because none of the three faculties traditionally distinguished seem suitable as sources of impossibility, I will propose a revision to the traditional understanding of these faculties and argue that divine wisdom, which is not identical with any of the other three faculties, is the source of impossibility.

2 A preliminary account of God's faculties

Leibniz employs several different terms to refer to the three primary divine faculties or attributes:¹ (a) instead of 'intellect' or 'understanding' [fr. *entendement*, lat. *intellectus*], he sometimes uses 'knowledge' [fr. *connaissance* or *sçavoir*, lat. *cognitio*], 'intelligence' [fr. *intelligence*, lat. *intelligentia*], 'light' [fr. *lumière*], or 'wisdom' [fr. *sagesse*, lat. *sapientia*], (b) to refer to the will [fr. *volonté* or *vouloir*, lat. *voluntas*], he at times uses the terms 'choice' [fr. *choix*], 'love' [fr. *amour*], or 'goodness' [fr. *bonté*, lat. *bonitas*], and (c) what he typically calls 'power' [fr. *puissance* or *pouvoir*, lat. *potentia*], he sometimes calls 'force' [fr. *force*]. To make things less complicated, I will for the most part call them 'intellect,' 'will,' and 'power.' Each created mind shares these three attributes (see e.g. letter to Morell, September 29, 1698, A.I.xvi.164/Gr 139), even though its intellect, will, and power are of course less perfect than God's: finite minds only know some things distinctly, act voluntarily and in accordance with the

¹ Leibniz does not appear to distinguish between faculties and attributes (see e.g. T §87). He sometimes uses the term 'faculty' [fr. *faculté*, lat. *facultas*], for instance in T §171, and sometimes 'attribute' [fr. *attribut*, lat. *attributum*], for instance in M §48, to refer to intellect, will, and power. In two letters to Andreas Morell, he calls them 'primordialities' [fr. *prim[ordi]alités*; Grua reads *formalités*] and 'primacies' [fr. *primautes*] (September 29, 1698, A.I.xvi.164/Grua 139 and May 4-14, 1698, A.I.xv.560/Grua 126).

true good only sometimes, and possess only a limited amount of power. In God, on the other hand, these faculties are perfect and indeed take the form of three perfections: omniscience, omnibenevolence, and omnipotence (see Rutherford 1995, 40n11).

The importance of the distinction² between intellect, will, and power for Leibniz's system can hardly be overstated. It is crucial first of all for his solution to the problem of evil because it gives him a way to deny that God is the author of sin. After all, it allows Leibniz to say that God finds the essences of sinners fully formed in his intellect and wills to actualize them as part of the best possible world. The fact that Judas is a sinner, for instance, is not something that God has willed. The distinction between the divine faculties is also vital for Leibniz's anti-necessitarianism: Spinoza's key mistake, Leibniz argues, is that he "denied the Author of Things understanding and will" and that he consequently held that "all things exist through the necessity of the divine nature, without any act of choice by God" (T §173, GP.VI.217/H.234; cf. GP.VI.43f./H.67). Giving up the distinction between God's faculties, Leibniz warns, destroys divine freedom and hence all contingency. It also makes God superfluous, as it were, because on that view "every thing would exist through its own essence" ("Reflections on Hobbes" §3, GP.VI.390, my translation). After all, if Spinoza is correct that everything that can exist exists necessarily, there is no genuine need for a creator. Because he finds these consequences unacceptable, Leibniz aims to save contingency, freedom, and divine creation by distinguishing separate faculties in God.

Leibniz's distinction between God's faculties, then, is a vital anti-Spinozistic move. How exactly is this move supposed to secure contingency and divine freedom? A rough, preliminary account—which we will have to revise later—runs as follows. Like all divine faculties, God's intellect, as already noted, is perfect, which means that God is omniscient: he knows everything that can be known. This entails that the divine intellect "comprehends every idea and every truth, that is, everything, simple or complex, which can be an object of the understanding" (CD §13,

² By saying that there is a distinction between these faculties, or that Leibniz distinguishes them, I do not mean to imply that there is more than a modal distinction between them. Leibniz is in fact very critical of theories that reify mental faculties and seems to view them as qualities or modes of minds (see e.g. A.VI.vi.174/RB.174). This, however, is consistent with my claim that the distinction between certain mental faculties is crucial for Leibniz's system.

GP.VI.440/Schrecker 116). In other words, God eternally possesses ideas of all metaphysical or logical possibilities, as well as knowledge of all necessary truths (see “Remarks on King” §21, GP.VI.423/H.428; letter to Morell, September 29, 1698, A.I.xvi.164/Grua 139). In fact, the divine intellect is the source or ground of all possibles and all necessary truths (M §46; CD §§7f.; T §§7; 184; 189). Furthermore, because the divine intellect knows everything, it also knows how good and how bad different possibilities are:³ the ideas in God’s intellect “represent to him the good and evil, the perfection and imperfection, the order and disorder, the congruity and incongruity of possibles” (“Remarks on King” §21, GP.VI.423/H.428). Hence, the divine intellect also compares different possibles and judges them with respect to their goodness. It is God’s intellect, after all, that judges which world is the best (see T §225). The aim of the intellect is truth, however (see T §§7; 311; CD §18); it does not itself aim at goodness even though it makes judgments concerning goodness. After all, it judges not only that good things are good, but also that bad things are bad and that even things are even. God’s knowledge, then, is not constrained by the principle of goodness; God knows everything, no matter how good or bad it is.

God’s power is similarly unconstrained: he can do anything that is metaphysically possible.⁴ Leibniz, then, understands omnipotence to mean that one’s power is constrained only by logic or metaphysics: the only things God cannot do are the things that are metaphysically or logically impossible. As a result, power is not essentially good, according to Leibniz: it can be used for good or for evil purposes. Yet, power is a perfection because it is better to have it than not to have it, and when it is joined to wisdom and goodness, it becomes a “certain good” (“Meditation on the Common Concept of Justice,” Mollat 48/R.50). In God, power is indeed joined to

³ It is clear which horn of the Euthyphro dilemma Leibniz embraces: that something is good does not depend on the divine will; God’s choice does not make anything good. Instead, that something is good is an eternal truth that God’s intellect grasps. See DM §2 and “Meditation on the Common Concept of Justice,” Mollat 41/R.45f.

⁴ See e.g. Fifth letter to Clarke, §76: “God can produce every thing that is possible, or whatever does not imply a contradiction” (HGA.81; cf. §73/HGA.80; T §§171; 227).

wisdom and goodness. Even though it is in a sense prior to them⁵ because it extends to all possibles, no matter how good, God's power only effects what his will chooses, that is, what his intellect recognizes as best. Divine power, Leibniz states, is in itself indeterminate, but gets determined by God's "goodness and wisdom combined" (T §130, GP.VI.183/H.202).

The divine will, finally, is constrained by the principle of goodness: God can will only what is best.⁶ Hence, unlike the other two faculties, God's will is constrained not just by logical or metaphysical possibility; it is constrained to the good, or even the best.⁷ Leibniz often refers to this determination to the good as 'moral necessity.' He says, for instance, "it is a moral necessity that the wisest should be bound to choose the best" (T §230, GP.VI.255/H.270; cf. T §237; Fifth letter to Clarke, §4; "Reflections on Hobbes" §3, GP.VI.390/H.395). However, Leibniz insists that this is not a genuine limitation; being constrained in one's choices by one's wisdom and goodness is a "happy" necessity and a perfection (see e.g. T §§128; 175; 191; Fifth letter to Clarke, §§7 and 10). In fact, "the more perfect one is, the more one is determined to the good" (letter to Bayle, GP.III.59, my translation; cf. "On the Ultimate Origination of Things," GP.VI.304/AG.151), and hence the most perfect being is always completely determined to the good.

This preliminary account of the three primary divine faculties gets us closer to understanding how distinguishing these faculties is supposed to secure divine freedom and the contingency of

⁵ See T §149: "power ... precedes even understanding and will, but it operates as the one displays it and as the other requires it" (GP.VI.199/H.217).

⁶ See e.g. the *New Essays*, where Locke's spokesperson Philalethes says that "we might say, that God himself cannot choose what is not good," and Leibniz's spokesperson Theophilus replies, "I am so convinced of this truth that I believe we can assert it boldly ... and indeed that we would be very wrong to doubt it" (A.VI.vi.189f./RB.189f.; cf. "On Contingency," A.VI.iv.1652/AG.30; "On Freedom and Possibility," A.VI.iv.1447/AG.20).

⁷ See T §45: "The will is never prompted to action save by the representation of the good, which prevails over the opposite representations" (GP.VI.128/H.148; cf. T §149). Strictly speaking, we ought to distinguish between antecedent and consequent will here and say that God's will is antecedently constrained to the good and consequently to the best. I will return to that distinction below.

creation. As we have seen, each of the three divine faculties has a distinct role in God's creation of this world: "wisdom makes known to God" which world is the best, "his goodness makes him choose" this world, and "his power makes him produce" it (M §55, GP.VI.616/AG.220). Moreover—and this is key—the faculties have different objects.⁸ Because God's intellect and power range over everything that is metaphysically possible, Leibniz can say that God could have created a different world: there are alternatives to the best possible world about which God knew and that he had the power to actualize. The only reason God did not actualize a different world is that he did not want to do so, or rather, because these other worlds were less good. After all, as Leibniz sometimes puts it, "[t]o say that one cannot do a thing, simply because one does not will it, is to misuse terms" (T §228, GP.VI.254/H.269). God did not want to create a different world, but he could have.

In this way, the reason that God did not create a less perfect world is crucially different from the reason that God did not create, say, a substance with contradictory properties: he did not create the latter because it is metaphysically impossible, that is, because he was not able to create it or even conceive it. The principles of logic or metaphysics kept God from producing such a substance. In contrast, he failed to create a less perfect world—even though he was able to—because of his perfectly good will. What constrained him in this case were not the principles of logic and metaphysics, but rather the principle of goodness. God's will, then, explains the existence of the best because the will—unlike the other faculties—is morally necessitated, or constrained by the principle of goodness. Because the other faculties are not constrained by this principle, there is a sense in which it is within God's power to create other worlds. This, Leibniz claims, is sufficient to secure divine freedom and the contingency of the created world.⁹

⁸ Leibniz states this explicitly in T §171: "Power and will are different faculties, whose objects also are different" (GP.VI.216/H.233).

⁹ I cannot here evaluate this account of divine freedom and contingency, but it is clear that Leibniz endorses it. Thus he repeatedly insists that we need to distinguish between what God can do and what he will do (e.g. T §§171; 228; Fifth letter to Clarke, §§9 and 73), and claims that God is free because there are other possibilities that God could have actualized (see e.g. CD §21; letter to Molanus, 1699, A.I.xvii.611; T §230).

3 Impossibility and the divine faculties

Let us now turn to the notion of impossibility. Leibniz's claim that not all possibles are compossible is, as most commentators agree, intended to (a) group possibles into possible worlds among which God chooses, and (b) explain why God does not actualize all possibles.¹⁰ Because Leibniz also explains God's choice of the best possible world in terms of the divine faculties, it is natural to wonder how exactly the notion of impossibility fits into the story of the interplay between God's intellect, will, and power that I sketched in the previous section. Interestingly, the standard solutions to the puzzle of impossibility locate the source of impossibility in different divine faculties.¹¹

Versions of what is known as the logical interpretation of impossibility view God's power and intellect as the source of impossibility: proponents of this approach typically hold that God cannot actualize substances whose concepts are impossible because their coexistence would constitute a logical contradiction. Because God's power is constrained by the principles of logic or metaphysics, God simply cannot actualize an impossible—that is, logically contradictory—set of possibles.¹² On this interpretation, then, God can only create collections of substances whose concepts are compossible; because some possibles are impossible, God is simply unable to create the collection of all possibles. In this way, the principle of contradiction partitions possibles into sets of compossibles, or into possible worlds, in God's intellect and makes it impossible for God to actualize anything but one of those sets. Proponents of this approach typically argue that all world mates must mirror each other or express the same world; two substances that fail to express the same world, or the complete concepts of two such substances, are impossible and their coexistence is metaphysically impossible.

Versions of what is sometimes called the lawful interpretation, on the other hand, hold that the divine will is the source of impossibility.¹³ The principles of logic and metaphysics, they contend, do not place constraints on what God can create; the coexistence of substances with

¹⁰ This is argued explicitly in Wilson 1993, 119 and Messina and Rutherford 2009, 962.

¹¹ Messina and Rutherford acknowledge that this is “[o]ne of the chief issues” (2009, 962).

¹² For one of the most influential versions of this interpretation, see Mates 1986, 75.

¹³ This interpretation is advanced, for instance, by Cover and O'Leary-Hawthorne 1999, 137ff.

impossible concepts would not entail a logical contradiction. Hence, it is in God's power to create the collection of all possibles, or any subset thereof. So, the lawful interpretation claims that contingent laws that God might choose place constraints on compossibility. A set of possibles is impossible, on this view, only on the hypothesis that God chooses a specific type of universal law which these possibles do not obey. This means that the lawful interpretation locates the source of impossibility in the divine will, that is, in what God chooses or might choose.

The classification of some other solutions to the puzzle of impossibility is less straightforward. For instance, versions of what James Messina and Donald Rutherford call the cosmological interpretation¹⁴ appear to explain the grouping of possibles into possible worlds in terms of the divine intellect, while they—arguably—explain the fact that God does not create all possibles in terms of the divine will. On this interpretation, after all, possibles are compossible and constitute a possible world if and only if God can conceive them as belonging to the same world, that is, as mutually connected as well as “united within a common spatiotemporal order” (Messina and Rutherford 2009, 969f.). Which sets of possibles constitute possible worlds thus has to do with what God can conceive—or what is conceivable—and hence with the divine intellect. If being a world means being connected in a certain way, nothing outside of the divine intellect, which knows all truths, is needed in order to group possibles into worlds. Yet, this does not fully explain why God did not create all possibles, that is, it only addresses what I above described as the first purpose of Leibniz's notion of impossibility. After all, even if it is a fact, known by God's intellect, that only certain collections of substances constitute a world, we still need to know why God chooses to create a world rather than the collection of all possible substances.¹⁵ The divine intellect, after all, contains all possibles, and because according to the cosmological interpretation it is metaphysically possible for all possibles to coexist, God has the power to actualize all of them. Consequently, in order to explain why God does not create all possibles, the cosmological interpretation needs to claim that God prefers connected to

¹⁴ This interpretation is advanced by Messina and Rutherford 2009, Rutherford 1995, 187, and Koistinen and Repo 1999, 207ff.

¹⁵ See McDonough 2010, 141n12, who raises this criticism.

unconnected sets of substances, so that God would not create the latter, even though it is within his power. This preference, arguably, must be located in the divine will.¹⁶

Different proposed solutions to the puzzle of impossibility, then, locate the source of impossibility in different divine faculties. Locating them in God's faculties makes sense, of course: whatever impossibility is, it must somehow arise in the divine mind, that is, from God's mental faculties or their objects. Yet, as recent discussions of impossibility have nicely illustrated, there appear to be serious problems for each of the standard solutions, and some of these problems turn out to be closely connected to the roles God's faculties are supposed to play in Leibniz's system more generally. Take the logical interpretation. As we have seen, on standard versions of this solution, God is unable to create certain collections of substances because their coexistence would involve a logical contradiction. This means that God's power is rather restricted: God can only create any given substance along with all of its world mates, that is, he cannot create it on its own or together with substances that belong to different worlds.¹⁷ Moreover, on this interpretation the fact that God creates a world in which the perceptions of all substances harmonize is not something that reveals God's goodness or his preference for harmonious, ordered systems. Instead, it is simply a matter of logic that if God creates at all, he creates a world that is ordered or harmonious in these ways. Looking at the world and finding it to be harmonious, then, reveals nothing about God except that he is powerful enough to create something. This does not fit well with the ways Leibniz typically describes the divine attributes and their role in the creation of the best possible world. The logical interpretation, in other words, appears to limit the scope of God's power too much, and as a result it lets power do too much of the explanatory work. Moreover, as several commentators have pointed out, it is

¹⁶ Griffin 2013, 104 criticizes the cosmological interpretation along these lines. As we will see below, however, there is a more plausible source of God's preference for connected collections of substances: instead of saying that God chooses to constrain himself to spatiotemporally connected worlds, we can say that his wisdom constrains him thus. That will be the solution for which I argue below. Yet, proponents of the cosmological interpretation do not, to the best of my knowledge, indicate that they intend to take that route.

¹⁷ Messina and Rutherford raise this as an objection to the logical interpretation, along with other objections (2009, 963ff.).

implausible to suppose that the coexistence of any Leibnizian substances could be logically or metaphysically impossible (see e.g. Messina and Rutherford 2009, 965). After all, Leibniz holds that substances are radically independent of one another. As such, it should be within God's power to actualize any collection of possibles; logic or metaphysics should not place any constraints on which collections of possibles God can create.

Consider next versions of the lawful interpretation. As mentioned above, this proposed solution claims that possibles are impossible only on the hypothesis that God chooses a certain type of universal law. Only collections that violate this law are impossible. While this avoids the disadvantages of locating impossibility in God's power, locating it in God's will has problems of its own. Messina and Rutherford put this very succinctly: impossibility cannot be the result of a (hypothetical) divine volition because if it is up to God's choice which substances are or are not compossible, the notion of compossibility is no longer very useful (2009, 967). After all, impossibility is supposed to explain why God does not actualize all possibles. According to the lawful interpretation, however, the explanation is, at bottom, that God would not create all possibles since God would only choose worlds with certain universal laws. In other words, this interpretation "does not so much explain God's choice as presuppose it" (Messina and Rutherford 2009, 966), and it hence turns impossibility into an idle wheel. If Leibniz's notion of impossibility is doing any real explanatory work, as Leibniz appears to think it does, the lawful interpretation cannot be correct. The cosmological interpretation shares these shortcomings insofar as it presumably explains why God does not create all possibles in terms of the will, that is, insofar as it presupposes that God would only choose to create a spatiotemporally unified world (see Griffin 2013, 104). After all, the cosmological approach does not employ the notion of impossibility to explain why God creates a unified world instead of the collection of all possible substances; it merely assumes that God would not do the latter.

Locating the source of impossibility in the will, then, seems like a bad strategy because it makes the notion of compossibility superfluous. Moreover, because the will also explains why God chooses the best, placing impossibility there results in an odd picture in which God decides in two steps. First, God wills to narrow down the candidates for creation by choosing universal laws or by choosing to create a spatiotemporally united world, then he chooses to actualize the best candidate in this restricted field. This seems problematic because it is unclear

what the first step could possibly contribute. Why does God not skip the first step and simply choose to actualize the best among all the candidates? Unlike academic hiring committees, after all, God can compare extremely large—even infinite—numbers of candidates without the slightest difficulty. Making a shortlist does not appear necessary, nor does it seem to contribute anything to the explanation of why God chooses to create the world that he creates.

A proponent of the lawful interpretation might retort that the first of these two steps—that is, the creation of a shortlist—should not be understood as literally taking place in the divine mind. Perhaps imagining God’s choice as occurring in two steps is merely a useful fiction that illustrates something important about God’s reasons for creating. In that way, it would be like the notion of God’s antecedent will that Leibniz sometimes invokes, that is, the notion that antecedently God’s will inclines “toward actualizing all good and repelling all evil, as such, and in proportion to the degree of goodness and evil,” but that by his consequent will God decrees what is best overall (CD §25, GP.VI.442/Schrecker 119; cf. CD §§24ff.; T §325; “Summary of the Controversy,” GP.VI.382/H.383). The import of the distinction between antecedent and consequent will does not appear to be that God literally wills twice, but rather that God aims only at the good, insofar as it is good; he actualizes a world that contains evils not because he finds those evils attractive individually, but because he is attracted to the goodness of that world as a whole. A proponent of an interpretation that locates impossibility in the will might suggest that the notion of impossibility plays a similar role. God may not literally will to make a shortlist of candidate worlds, but perhaps the notion of impossibility is supposed to illustrate that lawfulness or harmoniousness has a central place in God’s decision process: God is more attracted to lawful worlds than to unharmonious worlds, and this is the central reason that God does not create all possibles.

I think this is a reasonable response, and a version of this solution does appear superior to the logical interpretation. Yet, it does not satisfy me completely. After, all, it would be rather disappointing if impossibility were merely a quasi-metaphorical way to refer to the fact that harmonious worlds are more attractive to God’s will than non-harmonious ones. To explain why God does not create all possibles, we would then have to discuss the value of harmony and compare it to the value of unharmonious but larger collections of substances. The notion of impossibility would not ultimately help at all; it would merely describe the fact that God prefers lawful worlds just as the notion of God’s antecedent will merely describes rather than

explains the fact that God strives for everything that is good to the extent that it is good. Moreover, while it may be true that for Leibniz any harmonious world is better than any disharmonious world,¹⁸ and that harmony is a central good-making feature of sets of substances, there are other places where God could draw the line. I think that there are features possessed only by a subset of harmonious worlds that God finds particularly attractive, and any world with one of these features may arguably be better than any world lacking that feature. For instance, containing free, intelligent creatures that know God and are capable of moral agency might be such a feature. Becoming better over time might be another.¹⁹ Hence, the lawful interpretation would also have to answer the question why there is not a separate shortlist for any feature that God prefers, or in other words, why God chooses lawfulness or harmony as the cut-off, rather than some more demanding feature.

We appear to be left with the following dilemma. Impossibility must somehow originate in the divine faculties, but none of the faculties appears to be up to the task. God's power and intellect, being limited only by the principle of contradiction, extend to all possibles. As far as power and intellect are concerned, it seems, any set of possibles should be compossible. Denying this, as the logical interpretation does, unacceptably limits God's omnipotence and

¹⁸ I am, for now, bracketing the important question whether there is even a clear way to draw a line between harmonious and non-harmonious worlds, or between lawful and non-lawful worlds. There is some indication, after all, that any world can be viewed as obeying some kind of law (see e.g. DM §6; cf. Brown 1987, 179; Wilson 1993, 129). If that is the case, the problem for interpretations that locate the source of impossibility in God's will is even worse because in that case, there is either no constraint whatsoever, or God's will would have to impose a constraint arbitrarily. Yet, Feeney argues that it is not the case that all collections of substances can be viewed as lawful (see his contribution to the present volume). I will return to this issue below, arguing that there is a sense of 'harmony' that is a feature of only some collections of substances.

¹⁹ See e.g. "On the Ultimate Origination of Things," where Leibniz says that it is "the crown of the universal beauty and perfection of the works of God ... that the entire universe is involved in a perpetual and most free progress, so that it is always advancing toward greater culture" (GP.VII.308/L.490f.).

undermines the independence of created substances that seems crucial to Leibniz. God's will, on the other hand, seems like a more suitable source of constraints on the collections of substances God might create because the will is subject to the principle of goodness. Yet, locating impossibility in a divine choice means that one can no longer view impossibility as something that constrains or explains God's choice, except insofar as an earlier choice can constrain a later choice, or, more precisely, insofar as a choice can be constrained by another choice that is prior to it in the order of reasoning. If a divine choice grounds impossibility, what ultimately constrains or explains God's choices must be something other than impossibility, and as a result, the notion of impossibility no longer plays a genuine explanatory role in its own right. What explains why God only considers certain types of creations, on such interpretations, is ultimately simply that this type of creation is superior, or more attractive to God's will. While one could call the feature that makes this type of creation more attractive to God 'compossibility,' not much is gained by introducing that notion.

The dilemma with which we appear to be faced, in other words, is the following: impossibility arises either from the principle of contradiction or from the principle of goodness, that is, it arises either from God's intellect and power, or from God's will. Both of these options, however, seem unacceptable. Understanding impossibility in the first way conflicts with evidence that Leibniz takes it to be metaphysically possible for God to actualize any collection of possibles. Hence, the constraints of impossibility—whatever they are—must be more demanding than logical or metaphysical impossibility. Understanding impossibility in the second way, on the other hand, appears to make it superfluous, because then it can no longer explain what God chooses, or place constraints on the kinds of things among which God chooses. Constraints that are chosen by God cannot be genuine constraints on God's choice.

4 Amending the preliminary account of God's faculties

4.1 Michael Griffin's interpretation

In order to escape this dilemma, I think it is necessary to revise what I have so far said about God's faculties and their roles. After all, we need something in God's mind that is not the will but that somehow rules out some of the options that the divine intellect contains and that God's

power can actualize. To see what this extra thing might be, it helps to turn to Michael Griffin's solution to the puzzle of impossibility. His discussion is particularly interesting for my purposes because, unlike most other interpreters, he explicitly bases his solution on the distinction between God's attributes. Griffin argues that depending on which attribute we consider, we get different answers to the question which collection of substances comprises a possible world (Griffin 2013, 106). When we consider God's intellect and power, that is, when we consider what God can understand and what he can do, any collection of possibles constitutes a possible world because no logical contradictions arise in any such collection. Yet, when we take into consideration that God is not only omniscient but also wise, only collections of possibles that are sufficiently systematic, or exhibit spatiotemporal continuity, comprise possible worlds.²⁰ After all, someone who creates a set of substances without this kind of continuity or systematicity would not be perfectly wise. Finally, when we also take God's goodness into consideration, the best possible world is the only possible world, because his perfect goodness constrains God to the best. Even though he holds that these are all legitimate ways to understand the notions 'compossibility' and 'possible world,' Griffin appears to think that in most passages, the second sense is the most relevant one: when Leibniz talks about the possible worlds that God considers, he typically has in mind universal systems that satisfy God's wisdom; conversely, when Leibniz talks about the impossibility of certain possibles, he means that they are not sufficiently systematic to be consistent with divine wisdom (see 2013, 111).

One might think that Griffin locates the source of impossibility in God's intellect, because he believes that relative to divine power all possibles are compossible, but that relative to divine goodness or will, only the best world is possible. Yet, upon closer examination, this is not obviously the case. Griffin appears to distinguish between God's intellect and God's wisdom, and it is the latter that is doing most of the work in his interpretation. After all, Griffin claims that "God understands all of the substances and all of the combinations of substances that are in

²⁰ Griffin bases this claim mainly on T §225, where Leibniz says that "the divine Wisdom distributes all the possibles it had already contemplated separately, into so many *universal systems* which it further compares the one with the other" (GP.VI.252/H.267; emphasis mine). In order to be a universal system, Griffin contends, these collections must exhibit spatiotemporal continuity and be "systematic to some extent" (2013, 106).

his absolute power” (2013, 106). Griffin thus seems to hold that God’s intellect, like God’s absolute power, is constrained only by the principle of contradiction. Divine wisdom, on the other hand, is more demanding than that: it narrows down the logically possible combinations of substances that God’s intellect contains and that God’s power could actualize, to those combinations that are universal systems (*ibid.*). Yet, Griffin does not identify divine wisdom with divine goodness and hence, presumably, not with God’s will. After all, goodness on Griffin’s view is even more restrictive than wisdom and narrows down the candidates to the best among the universal systems. Hence, Griffin does not seem to identify wisdom with any of the three primary divine attributes.

4.2 *The wisdom approach*

Grounding impossibility in God’s wisdom, and denying that wisdom is identical with will, intellect, or power, seems like a promising strategy for solving the dilemma described above. After all, this strategy—which we can call ‘wisdom approach’—provides us with a divine attribute that is not the will but nevertheless more restrictive than God’s intellect or power. Thomas Feeney in fact adopts a version of this strategy as well.²¹ Yet, because neither Griffin nor Feeney discuss the notion of wisdom and its relation to God’s other attributes in much detail, it seems profitable to examine Leibniz’s use of that notion more fully. This is the aim of the rest of the present chapter. If the wisdom approach works and if there is good textual evidence to support it, it promises to advance not only our understanding of impossibility but also of the divine attributes.

The principal questions that need to be answered in order to assess the prospects of the wisdom approach are the following: (1) Is there sufficient textual support for a divine faculty or attribute of wisdom that is not identical with God’s will, intellect, or power? (2) If so, is wisdom a proper part of one of the other faculties, is it something that spans more than one of these faculties, or is it something completely distinct? (3) How exactly might impossibility arise in divine wisdom and which principle governs this faculty? I will answer the first question in the affirmative: there is what I take to be conclusive evidence that wisdom is a divine attribute that

²¹ See Feeney’s contribution to this volume.

is not identical with any of the three primary attributes listed above. With respect to the second question I will argue, against Feeney, that we should not view wisdom as spanning intellect and will, but as either being part of the intellect or a completely distinct faculty. Properly answering the third question unfortunately requires a more extensive investigation than I am able to provide here, but I will end with some speculation regarding this question. In particular, I will briefly explore the possibility that the Principle of Sufficient Reason governs divine wisdom and gives rise to impossibility.

Let us first look at the textual evidence for distinguishing wisdom from each of the three primary attributes. When I introduced those primary attributes above, I mentioned that Leibniz sometimes uses ‘intellect’ and ‘wisdom’ interchangeably. He does this, for instance, in *Causa Dei*:

[God’s] wisdom [*sapientia*] ... because of its immensity, is called *omniscience*. Since this wisdom is the most perfect possible (just as is his omnipotence), it comprehends every idea and every truth, that is, everything, simple or complex, which can be an object of the understanding [*intellectus*]. It comprehends equally everything possible and everything actual. (CD §13, GP.VI.440/Schrecker 116)

In this passage, as in some others,²² Leibniz describes wisdom as encompassing all possibles and all truths, and thus presumably as a synonym for what I above described as God’s intellect. As a matter of fact, the passage from *Causa Dei* states explicitly that wisdom comprehends everything that can be the object of the intellect. Based on this and similar passages, then, the prospects for interpreting wisdom as an attribute that is not identical to the intellect and that places more restrictions on what God creates than the intellect does, may seem dim.

²² See e.g. letter to Morell, September 29, 1698: “*light* or wisdom [*lumière ou sagesse*] ... comprehends all possible ideas and all eternal truths” (Grua 139, my translation). In fact, this sentence is an explication of what Leibniz earlier in this letter refers to as the attribute of knowledge [*connaissance*]; *ibid.* See also T §7: “Power relates to *being*, wisdom or understanding [*la sagesse ou l’entendement*] to *truth*, and will to *good*” (GP.VI.107/H.127; cf. T §§121; 225).

Yet, there are other passages in which Leibniz uses ‘wisdom’ quite differently, and in the rest of this chapter I will also use the term in this second way.²³ For instance, as Leibniz writes to Louis Bourguet in 1716, “[i]deas or essences are all founded on a necessity independent of wisdom [*sagesse*], fittingness and choice; but existences are dependent on them” (April 3, 1716, GP.III.592/SLT.199/Erdmann 744). Because, as seen, the divine intellect is the source of ideas or essences and is governed by logical necessity, Leibniz cannot be using ‘wisdom’ as synonymous with ‘intellect’ in this passage. Another piece of evidence against always treating these two terms as synonyms is that Leibniz repeatedly defines ‘wisdom’ as the knowledge of happiness (*scientia felicitatis/la science de la félicité*; see e.g. “Aphorisms on Felicity,” A.VI.iv.2793/C 516; cf. A.VI.iv.2798; 2803; 2861; 2863; 2891; A.VI.vi.340/RB.340; Grua 579/SLT.167; Grua 581/SLT.169), the knowledge of the best (*scientia optimi*; see “About Justice,” A.VI.iv.2833; “About Right and Justice,” A.VI.iv.2837), or the knowledge of the good (*connaissance du bien*; see “Meditation on the Common Concept of Justice,” Mollat 48/R.50). This again suggests that wisdom is not quite the same as the intellect because wisdom, according to these passages, is something more restricted than the intellect: while the intellect contains all knowledge, wisdom consists exclusively in knowledge of the good, of the best, or of happiness. Such passages in fact indicate that wisdom is a proper part of the intellect, that is, that it is the subset of God’s knowledge that has goodness or happiness as its object. While it might strike some interpreters as odd to talk of mental faculties as having parts, Leibniz seems quite happy to talk in this way at times: his spokesperson Theophilus says in the *New Essays*, for instance, that “one does well to recognize two parts in [the faculty of reason], in accordance with the quite common view that distinguishes ‘invention’ from ‘judgment’” (A.VI.vi.476/RB.476).

A passage from Leibniz’s “Meditation on the Common Concept of Justice” supports the suggestion that wisdom is a proper part of the intellect: “wisdom ... is merely the knowledge of the good, as goodness is merely the inclination to do good to all and to prevent evil. ... Thus

²³ There is also a third way in which Leibniz uses ‘wisdom’ in a small number of texts. See “Meditation on the Common Concept of Justice,” where Leibniz identifies wisdom in human beings with prudence (Mollat 63/R.59) and with “knowledge of our own good” (Mollat 59/R.57). Yet, because wisdom in this sense appears to apply only to finite minds, I will not discuss that rather rare usage further.

wisdom is in the understanding, and goodness is in the will” (Mollat 48/R.50, transl. L.564). Wisdom is in the intellect, presumably, in the sense that the intellect contains knowledge of the good and therefore wisdom, even though it also contains other types of knowledge. On this picture, then, wisdom might be up to the task of giving rise to impossibility whereas the intellect more generally is not: while the intellect contains everything that is logically possible, wisdom is constrained by a narrower principle and might therefore serve to explain why not all possibles are compossible.

In some texts, however, Leibniz associates wisdom not with the knowledge of happiness or goodness, but with harmony, order, or lawfulness. This makes the suggestion of locating impossibility in God’s wisdom even more promising because practically all interpretations of impossibility acknowledge that in order to be compossible, possible substances must harmonize, be ordered, or obey a certain kind of universal law.²⁴ In other words, most interpreters appear to agree at least in rough outline that the criterion for compossibility is something in the neighborhood of order or harmony among possibles or some kind of correspondence among the states of possible creatures. I will, for the time being, use the term ‘harmony’ in a loose and non-technical sense, construed so broadly that it captures any kind of regular correspondence among possibles or of the states of possible substances, that is, so that it captures the criteria for compossibility of nearly all interpretations. Later, I will refine and tighten this broad understanding of harmony. In the loose sense, then, most interpretations acknowledge that some kind of harmony is required for compossibility. The main point about which interpreters disagree is which divine faculty is the source of impossibility and hence what precisely the explanatory role and force of impossibility is. While some interpreters, as seen, argue that God is restricted to harmonious worlds because he would not choose disorderly worlds, or that he is restricted to such worlds only on the hypothesis that he decrees certain laws of harmony, others argue that God is restricted in these ways because he can only conceive of, and hence create, harmonizing possibles as existing together in a world. Even traditional versions of the logical interpretation claim that the creation of collections of possibles lacking a

²⁴ There is also some textual evidence for connecting compossibility and harmony. See e.g. the *New Essays*: “the universe contains everything that its perfect harmony could admit” (A.VI.vi.307/RB.307).

certain kind of harmony or agreement would imply a logical contradiction and that only collections that harmonize in the requisite way are compossible.²⁵

One passage in which Leibniz closely associates wisdom with harmony is from *Causa Dei*. In the context of explaining why God does not use his supreme power to make all sinners virtuous (CD §123), Leibniz claims that “we must resort ... to the treasures of supreme wisdom [*Summae Sapientiae divitias*], which absolutely has not allowed God to do violence to the order and nature of the universe, disregarding law and measure, nor to disturb the universal harmony, nor to select another but the best series of events” (CD §126, GP VI.457/Schrecker 141).²⁶ According to this passage, it is God’s wisdom that constrains him to worlds exhibiting a certain order or harmony, and eventually, to the best of these worlds. Leibniz makes similar statements in other texts, for instance in the *Theodicy*: “it is of the essence of God’s wisdom that all should be harmonious in his works” (T §91, GP.VI.152/H.172).²⁷ Here again, Leibniz associates the

²⁵ See for instance the role that the mirroring principle plays in Mate’s version of the logical interpretation (1986, 76). The mirroring principle, that is, the principle that creatures must mirror the world to which they belong, does seem to demand that there is a type of harmony among compossibles, in the loose sense of ‘harmony.’ This principle is widely acknowledged, not only by proponents of logical interpretations; see e.g. Wilson 2000, 13. For the connection between the mirroring principle and harmony, see M §59.

²⁶ Similarly in CD §142: “in the treasures of divine wisdom, that is, in the hidden God and (which comes to the same) in the universal harmony of the world, a profundity ($\beta\acute{\alpha}\theta\omicron\varsigma$) is latent, which contains the reasons why the actual series of the universe ... has been chosen by God as the best and as preferable to all others” (GP.VI.460/Schrecker 144). See also DM §31, where Leibniz provides a very similar answer to the question why God has chosen to create Peter or John: “God here followed certain great reasons of wisdom or appropriateness, unknown to mortals and based on the general order, whose aim is the greatest perfection of the universe” (GP.IV.457/AG.63).

²⁷ See also “On a General Principle” (July 1687): the principle of continuity “is absolutely necessary in geometry, but it also holds in physics, because the sovereign wisdom, which is the source of all things, acts as a perfect geometrician, and according to a harmony to which nothing can be added” (GP.III.52/SLT.131). Cf. A.VI.vi.56/RB.56: the Cartesian view “appears

harmoniousness of God's creation with God's wisdom. Viewing wisdom in this way is consistent with passages in which Leibniz defines 'wisdom' as the knowledge of the good or of happiness.²⁸ After all, harmony and goodness are very closely related for Leibniz, if not identified (see e.g. "The Elements of True Piety," A.VI.iv.1359/SLT.191; letter to Wolff, May 18, 1715, GLW.172; cf. Brown 1987, 197ff.), and so are happiness and harmony.²⁹ Consequently, all of these passages are evidence for understanding wisdom as a divine attribute that is not identical with the divine intellect but that might be a proper part of the intellect.

There are, however, additional texts that complicate this picture. A few passages, after all, suggest that divine wisdom is closely associated, or even identified with, God's will. See for instance the following excerpt from the *Theodicy*:

the divine Wisdom distributes all the possibles it had already contemplated separately, into so many universal systems which it further compares the one with the other. The result of all these comparisons and deliberations is the choice of the best from among all these possible systems, *which wisdom makes* in order to satisfy goodness completely. (T §225, GP.VI.252/H.267f.; emphasis added)

This passage, taken at face value, claims that wisdom itself chooses the best possible world, even though this role is elsewhere attributed to the divine will, as we have seen. Leibniz makes a very similar statement in his *Principles of Nature and of Grace*: the laws of motion, he says there, "do not depend upon the *principle of necessity*, as do logical, arithmetical, and geometrical truths,

unworthy of the wisdom of the author of things, who does nothing without harmony and reason." Finally, see PNG §13: "everything is ordered in things once and for all, with as much order and agreement as possible, since supreme wisdom and goodness can only act with perfect harmony" (GP.VI.604/AG.211).

²⁸ Below, however, I will point to crucial differences between viewing wisdom as the knowledge of the good and viewing it as concerned with harmony or order.

²⁹ See the *New Essays*, where Leibniz's spokesperson claims that only reason and will lead us toward happiness while sensibility and non-rational appetite merely lead us toward pleasure because the pleasures deriving from the inclinations that reason gives us, that is, pleasures "which occur in the knowledge and production of order and harmony, are the most valuable" (A.VI.vi.194f./RB.194f.). This suggests that happiness consists in knowing and producing harmony.

but upon the *principle of fitness*, that is, upon the choice of wisdom [*choix de la sagesse*]" (§11, GP.VI.603/AG.211). Here, again, choice appears to be attributed to divine wisdom.³⁰ Passages like this seem to have led Feeney to conclude that the activity wisdom must bridge that of intellect and will.³¹

Yet, there are good reasons to doubt that on Leibniz's view God literally chooses the best through his wisdom. At least as often as attributing choice to wisdom itself, after all, Leibniz says that wisdom merely prompts God to choose. Hence, it may, strictly speaking, be the will that chooses, prompted by wisdom, or by the intellect's knowledge about the good,³² and when Leibniz talks about wisdom as choosing something, he may simply be speaking loosely. One passage in which he describes wisdom not as choosing, but as prompting God to choose, is from the *Principles of Nature and Grace*, and in fact from the very section just quoted, in which Leibniz also attributes choice to wisdom directly. Leibniz says there that "God's supreme wisdom has led him [*l'a fait*], above all, to choose *laws of motion* that are best adjusted" (PNG §11, GP.VI.603/AG.210). If wisdom itself were the faculty of choice, or if God chose through his wisdom, saying that wisdom leads God to choose would seem rather misleading.

There is furthermore an interesting passage from the *Theodicy* in which Leibniz appears to draw a distinction between the choice proper and the activity of wisdom: "[God's] WISDOM made the selection [*triage*] among [all possible goods] and brought it about that God chose [*a choisi*] the best" (§116, GP.VI.167; my translation). Plausibly, this passage does not attribute the

³⁰ Cf. T §349: "*moral necessity* ... comes from the free choice of wisdom [*choix libre de la sagesse*] in relation to final causes" (GP.VI.321/H.334).

³¹ See Feeney's contribution to the present volume. Another reason for wanting to associate wisdom with the will might be that wisdom is closely related to goodness, which in turn is typically associated with the will. I will return to that issue below.

³² Even more strictly speaking, however, not even the will truly chooses, but God chooses in virtue of, or through, his will. See the *New Essays*, where Leibniz's spokesperson stresses that we should not talk of mental faculties "as real *agents*. Faculties or qualities do not act; rather, substances act through faculties [*par les facultés*]" (A.VI.vi.174/RB.174). Hence, the question whether it is God's wisdom or God's will that chooses boils down to the question whether God chooses through his wisdom or through his will.

choice itself to wisdom, but merely says that wisdom selects, or picks out, the best world, prompting God—presumably through his will—to choose this option.³³ Hence, it is most straightforward to read this passage as associating wisdom with the faculty of comparing different options and judging which option is best, that is, with the intellect, rather than with the faculty of choosing to create the best option, or with the will. In another passage, Leibniz says that “[f]rom an infinity of possibles, God chose, in accordance with his wisdom [*pro sapientia sua*],³⁴ that which is most appropriate” (letter to Bernoulli, March 13–23, 1699, GM.III.565/AG.170f.).³⁵ Here, once more, God does not choose through his wisdom, but merely prompted by, or in accordance with, his wisdom, which presumably informs him of which possibility is best.

The texts just listed are good—though admittedly not entirely conclusive—evidence that despite some passages that appear to suggest otherwise, wisdom is distinct from God’s will. Combined with two additional texts, they strike me as decisive. We already encountered the first of these texts above: his “Meditation on the Common Concept of Justice,” where, after defining ‘wisdom’ as “knowledge of the good,” Leibniz unequivocally claims that therefore “wisdom is in the understanding, and goodness is in the will” (Mollat 48/R.50). One could hardly ask for a more explicit answer to the question of where one ought to locate divine wisdom. The second passage is from the *Theodicy*: “the realm of eternal truths contains all the possibles, and consequently the regular as well as the irregular: there must be a reason that has brought about the preference for order and regularity, and this reason can only be found in the understanding”

³³ This distinction is unfortunately obscured in the Huggard translation by the fact that Huggard translates ‘triage’ as ‘choice’ and ‘a choisi’ as ‘select’ (H.187). However, the French noun ‘triage’ and the related verb ‘trier’ carry the connotation of sorting or grouping something; Leibniz does not appear to use it anywhere to refer to what the will does.

³⁴ Other possible translations of this phrase include “on account of his wisdom” and “by virtue of his wisdom.”

³⁵ See “Logical-Metaphysical Principles” (1689?): “God chooses, from an infinity of possible individuals, those which he thinks are most consistent with the supreme and hidden ends of his wisdom” (A.VI.iv.1646/SLT.50; cf. a draft of the ‘New System,’ GP.IV.476/WF.26; “The True Piety,” Grua 499/SLT.165; “Summary of the Controversy,” GP.VI.385/H.386).

(T §189, GP.VI.229; my translation). Even though Leibniz does not use the term ‘wisdom’ here, it should be clear by now that “preference for order and regularity” is a rather good description of what Leibniz frequently means by ‘wisdom.’ Hence, this passage is further evidence that wisdom, or God’s preference for ordered, harmonious collections of substances, is in the divine intellect rather than the will.

Even aside from the textual evidence, there are reasons not to associate wisdom with both the will and the intellect, especially if wisdom is supposed to be the source of impossibility. After all, such a solution appears to inherit the problems of interpretations locating impossibility exclusively in the will that I noted above. As already seen, impossibility is supposed to provide an explanation of why God does not choose to create all possibles. The best way to do this, it seems, is to posit something that places a constraint on God’s will. Saying that the will places constraints on itself does not seem to explain much, as argued above, and saying that the will together with the intellect places these constraints does not seem any more promising. As long as the will is involved in placing these constraints, they are not genuine constraints for the will. Hence, there are reasons to locate whatever constrains God’s will to choosing among harmonious worlds entirely outside of the will.

4.3 The principle that governs wisdom

I will now consider a potential objection to my argument against locating wisdom even partially in God’s will. One reason this objection is worth considering is that my response to it will shed light on an important aspect of wisdom, specifically on the important question of which principle governs divine wisdom and hence which principle gives rise to impossibility. The objection runs as follows: if the principle governing God’s intellect is the principle of contradiction, and the principle governing God’s will is the principle of goodness, wisdom must be associated at least partly with the latter. After all, wisdom, like will, obeys not only by the principle of contradiction but also the principle of goodness.

My response to this objection is twofold. First, even though the intellect extends to all logical possibilities and truths, it is not the case that the intellect therefore does not deal with goodness. As seen at the beginning of this chapter, the intellect’s job includes knowing, among other things, to what degree each possible is good and judging which collection of possibles is best. The

divine intellect is omniscient and hence knows everything there is to know about goodness, order, and harmony, just as it knows everything there is to know about evil, disorder, and disharmony. Hence, the fact that wisdom deals with order, harmony, or goodness, is not in itself evidence for claiming that wisdom must be associated with the will.

The second part of my response is more complex and concerns the question what precisely the principles are that govern God's will and wisdom. One might think that if wisdom and the will were governed by precisely the same principle, the objection under consideration would have a certain amount of force. Yet, that is not the case because even if will and wisdom were governed by the same principle, they could be entirely distinct faculties. After all, intellect and power are also governed by the same principle, namely the principle of contradiction: God's intellect contains all logical possibilities, and God's power can actualize all those possibilities, as seen above. Nevertheless, intellect and power are distinct faculties because the former is the faculty of knowing and judging possibles, while the latter is the faculty of actualizing possibles. In this way, will and wisdom could be distinct faculties even if they are both governed by the principle of goodness: the former could be the faculty of striving for the good, and the latter could be the faculty of knowing the good. On this picture, the extent to which the will is attracted to a possible, or a collection of possibles, is exactly parallel to the degree of goodness that wisdom or the intellect finds in this possible or collection of possibles.

While the picture on which will and wisdom are governed by exactly the same principle is an attractive one and accords very well with the ways Leibniz talks about wisdom in many of the texts considered above, it does not provide us with a perfect solution to the puzzle of impossibility. After all, the notion of impossibility, as employed by Leibniz, appears to be all-or-nothing: a set of possibles either is or is not compossible; compossibility and impossibility cannot differ merely in degree. If wisdom is supposed to ground impossibility, it is plausible to suppose that there must be a clear dichotomy between collections that are in accordance with divine wisdom and collections that are not. As with compossibility, being in accordance with divine wisdom should be all-or-nothing. The principle that governs the will, however, seems ill suited for grounding such a binary distinction. As already noted, the divine will is antecedently attracted to possibles, or to collections thereof, to the extent that they are good, and consequently wills to actualize the collection with the highest degree of overall goodness. It is not obvious, then, how this principle could also generate a non-

arbitrary, all-or-nothing distinction between collections that are compossible and collections that are not.³⁶ Unless impossible collections have no degree of goodness whatsoever—which I find highly implausible because any collection God can actualize, no matter how imperfect, ought to be better than nothing and hence be good to some extent—the principle that governs the will does not seem suitable for generating the distinction between compossible and impossible substances in a non-arbitrary way. This, in fact, is an additional reason not to locate the source of impossibility in the will.

Because the principle that governs the divine will does not seem suited for grounding the distinction between compossible and impossible collections of possibles, I would like to explore the possibility that wisdom is not governed by this principle. Recall that Leibniz sometimes identifies wisdom with knowledge of the good or of the best, and at other times associates it with harmony, order, and lawfulness. Above I claimed that these two ways of describing wisdom need not be in conflict because Leibniz in some texts identifies goodness with harmony. Yet, perhaps these two descriptions of wisdom are different after all. It seems most straightforward to understand ‘knowledge of the good or of the best’ to be the knowledge of all degrees of goodness, including the highest degree. If this is what wisdom is, it seems natural to view wisdom as governed by exactly the same principle as the will and to hold that the degree to which the will is attracted to a certain candidate corresponds precisely to the degree of goodness that wisdom finds in this candidate.³⁷ One plausible way to understand Leibniz’s association of wisdom with harmony or order, on the other hand, results in a rather different picture. Even though there may be a sense of ‘harmony’ that is synonymous with ‘goodness’ and hence also comes in degrees, Leibniz at times seems to have something else in mind. As seen, the feature

³⁶ The only non-arbitrary binary distinction it generates seems to be the distinction between the best possible world and all other collections. This would mean that with respect to the principle of goodness, the members of any non-optimal collection are impossible. As seen, this is what Griffin argues about impossibility with respect to God’s goodness (2013, 106). Yet, this notion of impossibility seems too demanding to do the work Leibniz wants it to do; for Leibniz there appears to be more than one possible world.

³⁷ This way of understanding wisdom fits quite well with certain texts, for instance Grua 468. (I thank Gregory Brown for calling that passage to my attention.)

that distinguishes compossible from impossible collections is plausibly all-or-nothing. Suppose, as most interpreters appear to, that this feature consists in a certain type of correspondence, ordering, or harmony among the possibles in the collection. If this is all correct, we can distinguish two senses of ‘harmony’ in Leibniz: one that is synonymous with ‘goodness’ and that is a matter of degree, and one that is not.³⁸ This opens up the possibility of understanding divine wisdom as concerned with harmony in the latter sense, which in turn would provide us with a much more promising way to ground impossibility.

Exploring the all-or-nothing sense of ‘harmony’ in detail would require a much more extensive discussion than I can provide here, but I would like to end with a very rough sketch of one way in which we could understand this notion.³⁹ I will set aside textual evidence for the time being and turn to it later. What principle might plausibly yield a sense of ‘harmony’ that is suitable for grounding compossibility? Or, on the assumption that God’s wisdom is the source of impossibility and that wisdom is concerned with harmony in this all-or-nothing sense: what principle might govern divine wisdom and yield a binary distinction between worlds that are in accordance with divine wisdom and those that are not? The principle we are looking for has to be something more restrictive than the principle of contradiction, as I argued above, and also more restrictive than God’s antecedent will, which extends to everything that has some degree of goodness. Yet, it has to be less restrictive than God’s consequent will, because otherwise it would restrict God to only one world, namely the best. Looking at it from this perspective, I think there is an obvious candidate: the Principle of Sufficient Reason (PSR). This principle seems to fit all desiderata. It is more restrictive than the principle of contradiction because a creation with indeterministic laws is, arguably, logically possible, though it clearly violates the PSR. Likewise, it is more restrictive than God’s antecedent will because a creature that

³⁸ Koistinen and Repo also consider the possibility that there are two senses of ‘harmony’ in Leibniz and that one of them is relevant for compossibility: “there is the harmony which obtains necessarily between any two substances in the same world, and there is the harmony which belongs, in different degrees, to whole worlds” (1999, 213).

³⁹ I am not claiming that this is the only promising way of understanding harmony in an all-or-nothing way. There may well be others. I am merely exploring an option that strikes me as interesting and plausible.

randomly produces changes and hence violates the PSR seems to have some small degree of perfection or goodness. It is also less restrictive than the principle governing God's choice of the best because there are, arguably, worlds inferior to the actual world that are nevertheless in accordance with the PSR.⁴⁰ Moreover, whether something violates the PSR is not a matter of degrees: plausibly, something either violates the PSR or it does not. And finally, it is uncontroversial that the PSR is an important and fundamental Leibnizian principle; invoking it to explain impossibility, harmony, and wisdom would therefore put these notions on a firm and non-arbitrary foundation.

One might worry, however, that the PSR cannot possibly be the principle that governs impossibility or the harmony among compossible possibles. A potential objection goes as follows: at least in worlds like the actual world in which finite substances do not truly interact with one another,⁴¹ the PSR requires only that intra-substantial causation is deterministic, or that within the nature of each finite substance there is an explanation or sufficient reason for all of its states.⁴² In other words, the objection goes, the PSR cannot possibly govern the harmony among possibles or among created substances because it does not require any kind of correspondence among them. The collection consisting of Julius Caesar and Don Quixote, for instance, does not violate the PSR as long as all states of these two individuals arise within them in a deterministic

⁴⁰ God's choice to create a non-optimal world would violate the PSR because there would not be a sufficient reason for such a choice. Yet, this inferior world might not, in itself, violate the PSR, and that must be what is at issue here. After all, the important question is whether finite substances, or possible finite substances, harmonize with each other, not whether they harmonize with God.

⁴¹ All possible finite substances might in fact be like this, on Leibniz's view, because on a plausible interpretation Leibniz views the interaction between created substances to be metaphysically impossible.

⁴² The PSR, or divine wisdom, may also require some other things, such as that there be no vacuum, no atoms, and no non-identical indiscernibles; see e.g. letter to Bernoulli, January 13-23, 1699, GM.III.565/AG.170f., Leibniz's fifth letter to Clarke, §25, and Brown's contribution to the present volume.

fashion. Yet, this collection is clearly not harmonious and ought to be a paradigmatic case of a collection ruled out by impossibility.

The problem with this objection is, however, that it assumes that the PSR applies only to causation at the bottom, metaphysical level. It is true that at that level, the only genuine causation in creatures is intra-substantial causation. Yet, I find it plausible to extend the PSR to the other levels that Leibniz acknowledges, and in particular, to the ideal level at which finite substances do influence each other. After all, Leibniz famously acknowledges that while created substances do not interact with one another strictly speaking, it is legitimate and in fact crucial for certain purposes to view them as interacting in a less strict, or ideal, sense. This kind of interaction is grounded in a correspondence between the states of these substances: a passion, confused perception, or imperfect state in one finite substance corresponds to an action, distinct perception, or more perfect state in another finite substance.⁴³ Actions and passions, Leibniz holds, are reciprocal (T §66; cf. M §52). As a matter of fact, as is well known, Leibniz calls this kind of correspondence ‘pre-established harmony’ and hence explicitly acknowledges it as a type of harmony (e.g. M §78).⁴⁴ Crucially for present purposes, Leibniz also claims that we can view the perfection in one substance as the reason for the corresponding imperfection in the other.⁴⁵ Only a collection that exhibits harmony in this sense, then, obeys the PSR at the ideal level. Collections of possible substances that fail to exhibit this kind of correspondence violate the PSR because no other created substance supplies a sufficient reason for the imperfect states of some substance in such a collection. Even though there is a sufficient reason for this imperfect state

⁴³ See e.g. A.VI.vi.211/RB.211; M §49. It is not sufficient to have some action for every passion, however; they have to correspond to one another. For instance, my imperfect state consisting in the perception of being punched must be explained with reference to another substance’s perception of punching. Hence, there is a rather close connection between the suggestion under consideration and approaches that invoke the mirroring principle.

⁴⁴ Leibniz even says in his “First Explanation of the New System” that “it is quite true to say that substances act on each other—provided we understand that one is the cause of changes in the other in consequence of the laws of harmony” (WF.49).

⁴⁵ See e.g. M §50; “New System of Nature,” GP.IV.486/AG.145. I discuss this in much more detail in Jorati (forthcoming).

within the subject of this state—it is dictated by its nature or law of the series, after all—the imperfect state is unexplained with respect to the other substances in this collection.⁴⁶ As a result, the collection of Caesar and Don Quixote would violate the PSR.⁴⁷

According to this sketch, a collection of finite substances is harmonious and in accordance with divine wisdom if and only if all imperfections or passions in any of these substances—bracketing miracles⁴⁸—correspond to, and are in the ideal sense explained by, perfections or actions in another finite substance in this collection.⁴⁹ The actual world has this feature, and

⁴⁶ This interpretation fits very well with the one Gregory Brown advances in the present volume.

⁴⁷ A creation consisting of only one finite substance would also violate the PSR because its imperfections would not be explained on the ideal level. See letter to Des Bosses, March 11, 1706: “that there should exist one substance alone ... is something that does not agree with divine wisdom; thus it does not happen, although it could happen” (LR.36/7).

⁴⁸ Leibniz does appear to allow, at least in some texts, that even the best possible world includes miraculous events, that is, events that have no natural explanation; I thank Gregory Brown for alerting me to this complication. Such miraculous events are admittedly problematic for my interpretation: according to my sketch, collections in which genuine miracles occur are not harmonious and hence not in accordance with God’s wisdom; such collections violate the PSR internally, even though there is of course an external sufficient reason—God—for the occurrence of miracles. This means that my sketch will need refining in order to be able to handle miraculous events. Yet, this does not appear to be a special problem for my interpretation. Even on other interpretations, if there are genuine miracles, Leibniz needs to say that God allows some violations of the natural order in order to preserve the moral order. The reasons God has for allowing such violations must ultimately be built into any promising interpretation of compossibility.

⁴⁹ Feeney’s distinction between creations that “may be found lacking internally” and creations that “may be found lacking only through comparison with something external” (see Feeney’s chapter) seems helpful here. To see that a world that violates the PSR is lacking, we do not need to look beyond that world. To see that a non-optimal but PSR-observing world is lacking, however, we would have to compare it to another world that is more perfect.

many other collections have it as well. Harmony, on this construal, is all-or-nothing: collections of possibles either possess or lack this feature; they either violate the PSR or they do not. This solution has much in common with many extant solutions to the puzzle of impossibility and can be viewed as merely a new way of describing the regularity or lawfulness that is required for compossibility.⁵⁰ What I like about this solution in particular is that it is more specific than most other interpretations about what exactly the correspondence relation has to be and where in the divine mind it is located, as well as that it grounds this requirement in the PSR, one of Leibniz's fundamental metaphysical principles.

There is in fact good textual evidence for associating God's wisdom with the PSR. In the preface to the *New Essays*, for instance, Leibniz's argues that perpetual miracles would "destroy not only our philosophy which seeks reasons but also the divine wisdom which provides them" (A.VI.vi.66/RB.66).⁵¹ Similarly, Leibniz's spokesperson claims later in the *New Essays* that the inertia of bodies "depends not just on geometry but ... is founded on the wisdom of God, who does not change his influence unless he has some reason to do so" (A.VI.vi.176/RB.176). In the *Theodicy*, moreover, Leibniz says that God cannot "act otherwise than in accordance with order. ... [T]he dominion of God, the dominion of the wise [*l'empire du sage*], is that of reason" (T §327, GP.VI.310; my translation). All of these texts suggest that what it means to be wise is to

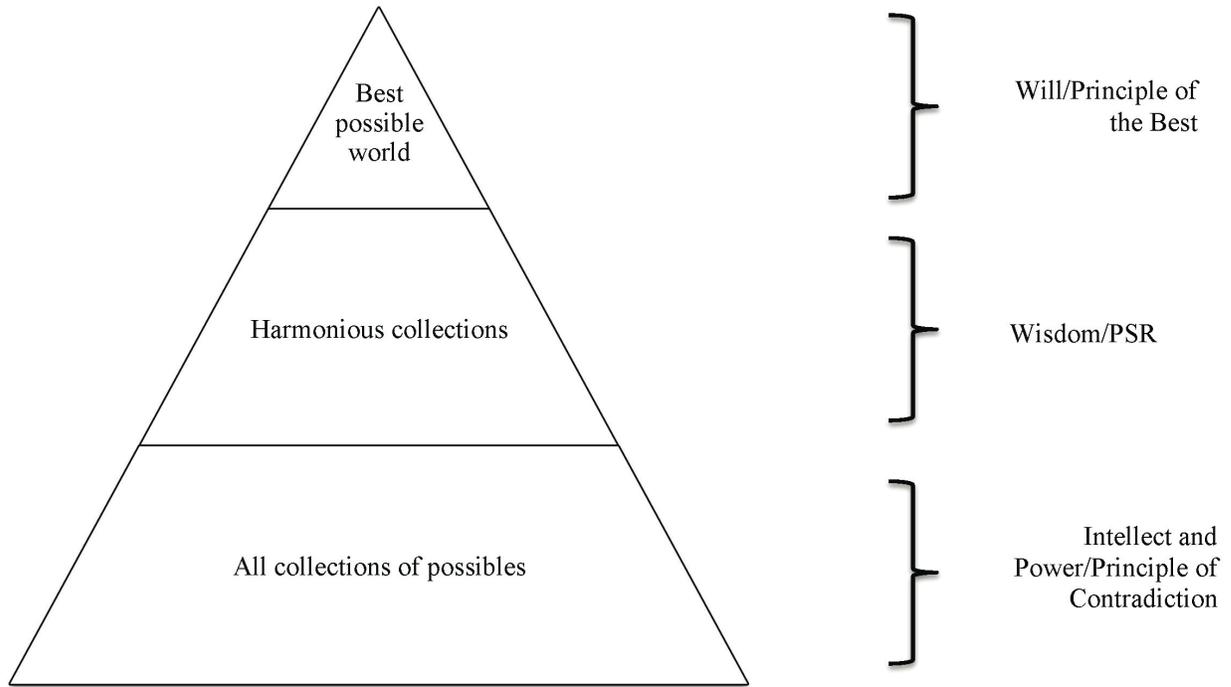
⁵⁰ There are even other versions that invoke the PSR, most notably Bertrand Russell's. Yet, Russell's usage of the PSR is rather different from mine, because he is not concerned with the question whether the PSR is violated within a possible world, but rather with the question whether God might have some sufficient reason for creating that collection of substances (1937, 67; cf. Wilson 1993, 128ff.). Russell also thinks that this gives rise to a metaphysical necessity (*ibid.*). I do not find Russell's solution promising because, among other things, it is unclear to me how to sort worlds into those that God had some sufficient reason to create and those that God had no sufficient reason to create. Russell invokes the need for general laws, but unless there is a non-arbitrary and clear-cut account of exactly what kind of law is needed, this is not enough.

⁵¹ Earlier in the preface, in a passage already quoted above, Leibniz even associates wisdom with both reason and harmony: the Cartesian view "appears unworthy of the wisdom of the author of things, who does nothing without harmony and reason" (A.VI.vi.56/RB.56).

obey the PSR in all things. Insofar as God is supremely wise, then, he cannot create a world that violates the PSR.

Before concluding, I would like briefly to revisit the question of whether wisdom is a proper part of the intellect or whether it is a completely distinct divine attribute. Since according to the interpretation just sketched wisdom is governed by a completely different principle than the intellect, and has a distinct explanatory role, it is tempting to view wisdom as its own, distinct attribute. On the other hand, as seen, there is some textual evidence for placing wisdom within God's intellect. I cannot satisfactorily settle that question here, but I wonder whether it ultimately makes a significant difference. What is important, I think, is that wisdom and intellect are not identical, and that wisdom is completely distinct from the will.

The following chart illustrates the rough outline of the solution under consideration. It shows, in particular, the ways in which God's attributes and their corresponding principles place constraints on the collections that God might create. God's intellect or absolute power and the principle of contradiction rule out only metaphysically impossible worlds. God's wisdom and the PSR rule out unharmonious worlds, and this is where we should locate impossibility. Finally, God's consequent will and the principle of the best rule out all worlds but the best one. This solution explains the constraints arising in God's nature in a non-arbitrary fashion because each of them is based on a divine attribute and its corresponding principle.



5 Conclusion

The way Leibniz describes God’s faculties and his claims concerning impossibility are, as I have shown, mutually illuminating. The former puts constraints on interpretations of the latter, and the latter force us to refine the traditional understanding of the former. I have argued that in order to construe a convincing solution to the puzzle of impossibility, we need to view wisdom as a divine attribute that is not identical to the intellect, will, or power, and locate the source of impossibility in it. One plausible way of understanding wisdom, as I have illustrated, associates it with the PSR. On the resulting picture, all collections that violate the PSR, and only those collections, are collections whose members are impossible.⁵²

⁵² I thank Gregory Brown for enormously helpful comments on an earlier draft of this paper.

Abbreviations

- CD: *Causa Dei asserta per justitiam ejus, cum caeteris ejus perfectionibus, cunctisque actionibus conciliatam* (1710). Cited by section number as in GP.VI.439–462.
- GLW: *Briefwechsel zwischen Leibniz und Christian Wolff*. Ed. by C. I. Gerhardt. Halle, 1860.
- M: *Monadology* (1714). Cited by section as in GP.VI.607–623.
- PNG: *Principles of Nature and Grace, Based on Reason* (1714). Cited by section as in GP.VI.598–606.
- Schrecker: *Monadology and other Philosophical Essays*. Ed. and transl. by P. and A. M. Schrecker. Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill, 1965.

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