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SPINOZA'S CONCEPT OF DIVINE WILL, ITS CRITICISM ANTICIPATED BY MAIMONIDES, AND ITS REFORMULATION BY LEIBNIZ

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ABSTRACT

This article analyzes Spinoza's conception of divine will and its deterministic nature, comparing it with Maimonides' criticism and Leibniz's reformulation. Spinoza identifies God's will with his intellect, which leads to the denial of human free will, because everything proceeds from the necessary causality. Maimonides, on the contrary, insists on the transcendence of divine will, a condition for creation and the free fulfillment of the commandments. Leibniz, an admirer of Maimonides, takes up this notion of possibility to refute Spinoza's necessitarianism and develop his doctrine of possible worlds. The article thus highlights a fundamental debate between determinism and contingency, where medieval Jewish philosophy, Spinozist rationalism, and Leibnizian metaphysics intersect.

Keywords: *Spinoza, Maimonides; R. Hasdai Crescas, Leibniz; determinism; free will; Principle of Sufficient Reason;*

INTRODUCTION

In *Ethics* I, 32 and Corollary, Spinoza seeks to prove that "will cannot be called a free cause, but only a necessary one," from which it follows that "God does not operate through the freedom of will" (Spinoza, 1925, 32). The demonstration of this proposition refers, in particular, to Definition VII of *Ethics* I, according to which a thing is said to be free if it exists solely by the necessity of its nature and determines itself to act (Spinoza, 1925, 33). Spinoza specifies that a thing is said to be "necessary or rather compelled," that which is determined by something else to exist and to act in a precise and determined manner (Spinoza, 1925, 33). In *Ethics* I, 33, scholium 2, Spinoza distinguishes between acting freely, as only God can do, and the human illusion of being able to act according to free will (Spinoza, 1925, 33; Gueroult, 1968, 281).

Spinoza never refuted the thesis defended by Maimonides and taken up by Hugo Boxel, which denounced the assimilation of divine eternity with natural necessity. Boxel emphasized that God's will is eternal, but it does not follow that the world is also eternal, insofar as God can decree from all eternity that He would create the world at a moment of His own choosing, and therefore that this created world remains contingent (Boxel, Letter 55; Maimonides, 1977, I, 73, 144).

In his response, Spinoza refers to Maimonides' thesis that nature cannot be the work of chance, but unlike Maimonides, he refuses to consider that nature proceeds from a divine plan and choice (Spinoza, Letter 56; Gueroult, 1968, 281). According to Spinoza, the necessity by which God wills a thing is identical to the necessity by which He causes a thing to be what it is. That is why the divine will and intellect are one

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and the same reality, and it is therefore absurd to try to separate them (Spinoza, 1925). For Spinoza, such a separation is anthropomorphic. When man affirms divine will, he is merely projecting his own characteristics onto God, just as the triangle, if it could speak, would say that "God is eminently triangular," and the circle would say that the nature of God is eminently circular (Spinoza, 1925).

Spinozist determinism, by excluding will, also excludes any possible world that is not capable of becoming actual. Let us recall that Leibniz, a few weeks before his meeting with Spinoza in The Hague in November 1676, wrote notes in which he seems to have adopted the necessitarianism of the *Ethics*, but at the end of 1677, following his confrontation with Niels Stensen on fatalism and divine freedom, he began to adopt the doctrine of possible worlds (Leibniz, 1923, §§ 53–55; Ottaviani, 2016, 15–41; Laerke, 2018, 437–440).

1. MAIMONIDES, LEIBNIZ AND THE QUESTION OF FREE WILL

Contrary to necessitarianism, Leibniz posits that "God understands not only everything that is and everything that will be, but also all possibilities," all of which proceed from the "will of God" (Leibniz, 1923, Ak. VI, 4, 1353).

Leibniz refers to fatalism with reference to Maimonides' *Guide for the Perplexed*, which he had read in Buxtorf II's Latin translation, a work he considered remarkable and "worthy of careful reading" (Leibniz, 1861, 2–3, 38–39). He particularly noted its criticism of the Ash'arites, who supported the necessitarian thesis. Leibniz summarized it as follows: "everything happens necessarily, and as a result of a certain governance... it follows that nothing is in the power of men, and that everything we call possible becomes necessary" (Leibniz, 1861).

Gueroult (1968, 371) pointed out that despite analogies between the Ash'arites and Spinoza, the doctrine of *Ethics* is different, in that everything necessarily results from the essence of God, and consequently the world is governed by rational necessity that is not arbitrary.

Maimonides denounces the fact that "the nature of the possible is abolished... It further follows from this opinion that religious laws, literally the commandments, are of no use" (Maimonides, 1977, III, 17, 310). Thus, Maimonides denounces in advance Spinoza's negation of possibility, which he reduces to a lack of knowledge (Spinoza, 1925, I, 33; Spinoza, *TTP* V, 5; XIX, 6).

Maimonides clarifies that divine will and human will cannot be compared in any way, and that it is only "by homonymy that the name 'will' is applied to both our will and that of the separate Being" (Maimonides, 1977, I, 57, 90). He emphasizes that not only causality, but also existence itself, cannot be applied to God, insofar as "He exists where He is, but not in existence" (Maimonides, 1977, II, 18, 203). Existence itself is always created according to transcendent divine will.

This is why the foundation of a thing's existence is not necessity, but God's absolute will. God's will creates only possible existence, but this will itself is not determined and therefore not limited by natural determinism (Maimonides, 1977, II, 27, 222; Hyman, 1986, 168; Seeskin, 2005, 183). Maimonides specifies that causality implies similarity, but since there is nothing in common between the Creator and his creatures, creation cannot be causal but only volitional. The absolute dissimilarity implies an asymmetrical relationship, one of "effusion" or "influence," compared to a water source whose profusion remains inexhaustible (Ibn Gabirol, 1950, V, 41; Zohar, II, 42b; Koyré, 1957, 18).

The notion of outpouring makes it possible to articulate continuous creation with prophetic experience. The amount of divine profusion capable of reaching humans remains a function of the degree to which man fulfills or transgresses commandments (Hirschensohn, 1914, 106–107). Even if necessity cannot concern divine will in itself, dimensions perceived by man can be described in terms of necessity.

For example, it follows from His essence that He is necessarily good, without limiting His will. Such necessity stems solely from our perception of divine greatness, not from His Being itself (Maimonides, 1977, II, 12, 188). Herrera (1864, III, 7, 17a–b) also emphasized that divine infinity does not act according to natural necessity, but only according to choice or possible will.

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2. THE NOTION OF POSSIBILITY AND THE PRINCIPLE OF SUFFICIENT REASON

In his notes on Maimonides, Leibniz retained the 19th proposition: "Everything whose existence is caused is, in relation to its own essence, that of a possible existence" (Leibniz, 1861, 24–25; Maimonides, 1977, II, Introduction, 161–162). This notion of possible existence is opposed to Spinoza's necessitarianism. Shortly after meeting Spinoza, Leibniz noted that "if all possibilities existed, then mere possibility

The notion of possible existence is opposed to Spinoza's necessitarianism. Shortly after meeting Spinoza, Leibniz noted that "if all possibilities existed, then mere possibility would suffice.

Therefore, there could be no God, except as possible" (Leibniz, 1923, 582). Before Leibniz, R. Hasdai Crescas, at the beginning of the 15th century, following Maimonides, had given a logical and non-causal formulation of the Principle of Sufficient Reason. He emphasized that in a series of reasons given with their consequences, there is always a reason for everything (Crescas, 1990, I, III, 2, 98–99; Maimonides, 1977, II, 2, 170; Feldman, 1984, 47).

Recall that Spinoza, who posits the equivalence between *causa* and *ratio*, nullifies R. Hasdai Crescas' distinction between the logical plane of reason and the ontological plane of cause. He then proposes a maximized version of the principle of sufficient reason, identified with that of sufficient cause, thus requiring, for each thing, "a cause or a reason both for the fact that it exists and for the fact that it does not exist" (Spinoza, 1925, I, 11).

In order to establish the idea of possibility, Leibniz profoundly modified the Spinozist meaning of the Principle of Sufficient Reason. In his *Specimen inventorum de admirandis naturae generalis arcanis*, written around 1686, Leibniz begins by noting that arithmetic and geometry are not concerned with the Principle of Sufficient Reason, and in a note to his text, he emphasizes that "the true cause, which causes some things to exist rather than others, must derive from the free decrees of the divine will, the first of which is to will to do everything in the best way" (Leibniz, 1923, GP VII, 309–310; Parkinson, 1974, 3).

In *Theodicy*, Leibniz emphasizes that contingencies belong to the realm of the possible, and that God never fails to choose the best, but without being compelled to do so (Leibniz, 1951, §§ 42, 45). It is the argument of the best that gives strength to Leibniz's version of the Principle of Sufficient Reason, and his proofs of the existence of God derive directly from this principle (Lovejoy, 1936, 165–166).

CONCLUSION

This article has shown that the divergence between Spinoza, Maimonides, and Leibniz concerns not only the definition of divine will, but also the very structure of reality: necessity or contingency. By identifying God with nature, Spinoza abolishes any possibility other than the actual. Maimonides, on the other hand, bases divine creation and commandments on a free and transcendent will, thus allowing for the realm of the possible. Leibniz, heir to this tradition, reformulates the Principle of Sufficient Reason by integrating contingency and the argument of the best, which allows him to transcend fatalism and reintroduce divine freedom, going beyond deterministic rationality and thus allowing an opening to divine creative transcendence.

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