

FREE WILL IN MALEBRANCHE AND LEIBNIZ

Matthew Wurst

DISSERTATION ABSTRACT

My dissertation explores two aspects of freedom in Malebranche and Leibniz. The first concerns the freedom with which God creates. Malebranche and Leibniz both think that God sees reasons to create a world, and that God freely decides to create a world in light of those reasons. They disagree, though, both about what the reasons are for why God creates and the sense in which God is free in creating. The second issue concerns their agreement that God and humans are free in the same sense, a controversial position in the period.

I argue that Malebranche's God creates a world with the purpose of glorifying himself. Furthermore, Malebranche's God's decision to create instead of doing nothing whatsoever involves the indifference of equilibrium. This is because God glorifies himself whether he creates a world or not. An implication of this position is that there is no contrastive explanation for why God creates a world instead of doing nothing whatsoever. A notoriously difficult question for Malebranche is how his account of human freedom is consistent with his commitment to occasionalism. I argue that recognizing that human freedom for Malebranche, too, involves an indifference of equilibrium allows an interpretation of Malebranche's account of freedom that does not undermine his commitment to occasionalism.

A problem for Leibniz is that it is unclear how the existence of the best possible world can be contingent if it is metaphysically necessary that God chooses whatever seems best to him. I deny that it is metaphysically necessary that God chooses whatever seems best to him. Instead, for Leibniz, God's decision to create the best possible world is free and contingent because it is founded on his free decision to set his will to always choose whatever is best. This decision is free because it is formally indemonstrable from God's nature. Recognizing that this decision is free shows how it can be that unactualized possibles strive for existence in their very nature, while also maintaining that the existence of the best set of them is contingent. Finally, I argue that, against what Leibniz's 1686 essay "On Necessary and Contingent Truths" may suggest, Leibniz maintains that there is a univocal sense in which all intelligent agents are free.