



PROJECT MUSE®

---

## Was Leibniz An Egoist?

Jennifer Frey

Journal of the History of Philosophy, Volume 54, Number 4, October 2016,  
pp. 601-624 (Article)

Published by Johns Hopkins University Press

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1353/hph.2016.0072>



➔ *For additional information about this article*

<https://muse.jhu.edu/article/635030>

# Was Leibniz An Egoist?

JENNIFER A. FREY\*

**ABSTRACT** Recent scholarship is nearly unanimous in attributing some form of egoism to Leibniz's moral philosophy. In this paper, I argue that there are substantive reasons to reject this status quo. First, I argue that any non-trivial form of egoism must take all of an agent's ends to be self-directed, and that this is incompatible with Leibniz's theory of justice. Second, I argue that a rational psychology is non-trivially hedonist only if it understands pleasure as a separately identifiable aim of all actions, and that this is incompatible with Leibniz account of pleasure.

**KEYWORDS** Leibniz, egoism, agency, justice, hedonism

## I. INTRODUCTION

THE PREVAILING CONSENSUS AMONG LEIBNIZ scholars is that Leibniz's rational psychology is thoroughly egoist.<sup>1</sup> To take a recent and especially prominent example, Nicholas Jolley compares Leibniz to his philosophical adversaries Hobbes and Spinoza in just this respect. He writes,

Leibniz is as uncompromising as they are in maintaining that no one deliberately does anything except for the sake of his own welfare, for one seeks the good even of those whom we love for the sake of the pleasure we derive from their happiness. (Jolley, *Leibniz*, 180)

According to this standard reading, Leibniz argues that all acts of altruism are merely apparent; ultimately, he maintains, such acts are done for the sake of the pleasure they bring about in the agent rather than for the sake of the good of another agent. On this interpretation, even God—the agent *par excellence*—is an egoist, since he too can act only for the sake of his *own* good and glory.

---

<sup>1</sup>The most prominent examples of this interpretation can be found in Loemker, *Leibniz: Philosophical Papers and Letters*, 47; Hostler, *Leibniz's Moral Philosophy*, 47; Brown, "Leibniz's Moral Philosophy," 413, and "Disinterested Love: Understanding Leibniz's Reconciliation of Self And Other Regarding Motives"; Schneewind, *The Invention of Autonomy: A History of Modern Moral Philosophy*, 257; and Jolley, *Leibniz*, 180–81. These authors typically refer to psychological egoism or hedonism, rather than to rational or ethical egoism or hedonism. If my arguments work, however, Leibniz was not an egoist or hedonist in *any* non-trivial sense.

---

\* Jennifer A. Frey is Assistant Professor of Philosophy at the University of South Carolina.

If the standard reading of Leibniz is correct, then the central task of Leibniz's ethics is to forge a conceptual reconciliation between this egoist psychology and the demands of justice; such an account holds that we must act, not only for the sake of the happiness of others, but also from purely disinterested motives. John Hostler, in his influential *Leibniz's Moral Theory*, presents Leibniz's ethics in just this way. He argues that this conception of justice

[p]resents Leibniz with a dilemma that forms the crux of his whole ethical system. For his theory of volition, on the one hand, leads to the consequence that all my voluntary behavior is aimed at the attainment of my own welfare; while morality, on the other, demands that I should act so as to promote the welfare of others. The two theses of egoism and altruism are equally fundamental to his thought, and in sharp conflict with one another. (Hostler, *Leibniz's Moral Theory*, 47)

The question for Hostler is as obvious as it is difficult: how can an egoist possibly be just in Leibniz's psychologically demanding sense?<sup>2</sup> On the standard reading, Leibniz's theory of justice looks like an attempt to square the circle.

Although there are textual passages that speak in its favor, I will argue that the standard reading gets Leibniz's theory of agency wrong. My argument will proceed as follows. First, I argue that we cannot ground any attribution of egoism in Leibniz's conception of rational appetite or will.<sup>3</sup> Though Leibniz does hold that all monads seek their own perfection through their appetitions of the good, 'good' here only refers schematically to the substantial form each monad naturally strives to exemplify or realize. Nothing about this metaphysical account of agency could determine whether the form toward which the will naturally strives could only be attained by securing ends or through motives that are necessarily self-interested or that are defined in terms of the agent's own welfare. And yet egoism without self-interest or individual welfare at its root is no egoism at all.

Second, I consider the essential role that pleasure plays in Leibniz's substantive theory of human goodness, and I rule out the possibility that his egoism is a form of psychological hedonism, as some commentators have argued.<sup>4</sup> My argument against this reading centers on the fact that for Leibniz, pleasure is the sense or perception of an increase in perfection, and thus is a perception of what is objectively desirable or valuable independent of the agent's own psychological states. Because the perception of the independent value is prior to the pleasure it brings about in us, pleasure cannot be what we seek when we act for the good, since the pleasures of acting virtuously cannot come about without a perception of what is objectively valuable independent of any subjective experience of such pleasure.

---

<sup>2</sup>Psychological egoism is not incompatible with all forms of altruism. For example, suppose we define altruism as acting in such a way as to promote the welfare of others. One can do this for the sake of one's own benefit, ultimately. However, this will not do for Leibniz, whose theory of justice demands that we seek the good of others from a wholly disinterested motive, that is, without regard to our own benefit.

<sup>3</sup>Though I cannot find an explicit argument of this form in the scholarship on Leibniz, it has been made against other historical figures with a view of the will very close to Leibniz's own. For a general sketch of how such an argument runs, see MacDonald, "Egoistic Rationalism: Aquinas's Basis for Christian Morality."

<sup>4</sup>See Loemker's influential general introduction, L 81.

Third, I argue that Leibniz's account of justice is incompatible with egoism, rather than something that needs to be reconciled with its demands. For Leibniz, the motivations of the just man cannot in any sense be described as 'self-directed' to his own welfare or pleasure. The only genuine motive of the just man is what Leibniz calls the *motive of perfection*. This motive can initially sound hedonist because Leibniz describes it as the pleasure one takes in the good of others; but again, for Leibniz, pleasure is just the perception of an increase in perfection, and justice furthermore demands that the pleasure in question be taken in the increase in the perfection of another rather than oneself. Accordingly, if the just man were simply after his own pleasure as his goal or end, as egoism demands, then he could never attain the pleasures unique to justice, since justice requires that we be pleased not by an increase in our own perfections but in that of others. Justice requires that we take the happiness of others as our end from a disinterested motive. Egoism, then, cannot accommodate justice.

Fourth and finally, I conclude with some programmatic thoughts about how to understand Leibniz's ethics in relation to his metaphysics, and how to understand the development of his theory of agency over the course of his very prolific writing career. I end with some general thoughts about what Leibniz's theory can teach us about egoism and moral psychology more broadly.

## 2. LEIBNIZ'S PERFECTIONIST ACCOUNT OF AGENCY

Any discussion of Leibniz's moral psychology must be compatible with his general theory of agency, so it is important that we begin there. Leibniz's theory of agency is grounded in his general theory of appetite or desire. Though he puts his own rationalist spin on it, his account fits within the traditional Aristotelian-Scholastic conception of appetite as a desiderative power that aims at what a cognitive power judges or perceives as good. Thus appetite *follows* cognition—it is conceptually dependent upon it. The will, as a rational appetite, follows rational cognition: it is ordered to pursue what the understanding recognizes as desirable or good.<sup>5</sup>

Leibniz's theory of appetite, like that of the Aristotelian tradition he is drawing upon, is ultimately grounded in a teleological metaphysics of substance. Contrary to the mechanistic élan of his philosophical peers, Leibniz retains something close to the Aristotelian concept of substantial form as the centerpiece of his metaphysics, and he argues that teleologically ordered organic striving is its essential characteristic. This commitment to substantial form is reflected most clearly in his doctrine of monads, which is in essence a theory of agency—of how substances can be said to act. It will be helpful to our understanding of his views on the will as the principle of appetite in a rational agency to review very briefly his metaphysics of monads, and how this figures in his account of rational appetite or will.<sup>6</sup>

<sup>5</sup>"The will is never prompted to action save by the representation of the good [*la représentation du bien*], which prevails over the opposite representations. This is admitted even in relation to God, the good angels and the souls in bliss" (*T* 148–49/*G* VI.128).

<sup>6</sup>The following discussion is not intended to be comprehensive, as that would take us too far afield. For the sake of brevity I must be insensitive to nuances that have generated a good deal of

2.1 *Monads, Agency, and Will*

Leibniz's metaphysics is best understood as a quest to understand substance and its principle of unity,<sup>7</sup> and he famously rejects any suggestion that a principle of unity could have a material source, since matter is infinitely divisible. Thus simple substances or basic unities are, for Leibniz, immaterial and remarkably mind-like, understood principally in terms of capacities for perception and appetite.<sup>8</sup> Leibniz's substances are not static—they are essentially *striving* or *active* agents.<sup>9</sup> A monad's striving from perception to perception takes place through its appetition or volition,<sup>10</sup> which is an "internal principle of change" directed toward the good from the monad's own point of view (i.e. according to its own powers of appetite and perception). All monads can be said to strive for the good in their own fashion, which is to say, in accordance with "the final causes of good and evil" that constitute the monad's own perfection and that contribute to the total perfection of the universe.<sup>11</sup> According to Leibniz's doctrine of creation, God actualized only those possibles that could maximize the total perfection of the whole universe, of which each actual monad is a constitutive part; thus each monad, in its very act of striving to be what it is, is also striving for the greatest possible perfection of a much larger whole. This fundamental monadic relation between part and whole is essential to Leibniz's idea of a "pre-established harmony." Leibniz argues that,

[n]ot only is the order of the whole universe as perfect as possible, but also each living mirror that represents the universe according to its own point of view, that is, each monad, each substantial center, must have its perceptions and its appetites as well ordered as is compatible with all the rest. (AG 211/G VI.603–4)<sup>12</sup>

All monads strive toward their own perfection and that of the universe through their capacities for perception and appetition, but not all monads possess these capacities to the same degree, and so not every monad strives toward its perfection in the same way. To accommodate this, Leibniz distinguishes different orders of monads, arranged hierarchically according to the clarity and distinctness of their perceptions.

At the top of this *scala monadae* is God. God is the only perfect being, and his perfections are threefold: he is omniscient, since he clearly and distinctly perceives every possible object of perception; he is omnibenevolent, since his will always seeks to actualize what he clearly and distinctly perceives to be the best among all possibles that exist in his understanding; and lastly, he is omnipotent, since he

---

controversy in the literature. I should note, however, that nothing I say about Leibniz's metaphysics is sufficiently controversial to call into question my basic arguments against the standard interpretation of his moral psychology.

<sup>7</sup>For instance, consider what Leibniz says in a letter to Thomas Burnett, to whom he writes, "I consider the notion of substance to be one of the keys to the true philosophy" (AG 286/G III.245).

<sup>8</sup>L 867/G II.269.

<sup>9</sup>AG 207/G VII.598.

<sup>10</sup>AG 215/G VI.609.

<sup>11</sup>AG 207/G VI.599; AG 223/G VI.620.

<sup>12</sup>I want to remain neutral about how to understand the perfection of the whole universe from God's perspective, though I am inclined to the view articulated by Donald Rutherford, *Leibniz and the Rational Order of Nature*, chap. 2.

has the power to do whatever he perceives is best. In short, God is the substance or mind *par excellence*.<sup>13</sup>

All other substances or beings are products of God's activity, and thus reflect these activities to the degree that they possess similar capacities; hence they are "mirrors of God."<sup>14</sup> Human beings, like God, are among the *minds* or *spirits* of Leibniz's ontology, as we too have souls capable of apperception and reason. Apperception is the capacity for reflection upon one's own perceptions and appetitions,<sup>15</sup> which allows a rational animal to take up a critical standpoint on its own activity, which, in turn, makes it conscious of its own life and sense of self. Because we rational animals possess apperception, we can reason, and because we can reason, we can grasp necessary and eternal truths and develop scientific knowledge, as well as conform our actions to our rational assessment of what is best.<sup>16</sup>

Directly below us on the hierarchy are the conscious *souls* of animals, which can have some distinct perceptions accompanied by memory and attention, but which do not have reflective self-awareness of their own activity or the ability to reason about it. And finally, at the very bottom of the Leibnizian great chain of being are the bare monads, which have only inattentive, unconscious, and indistinct perceptions. These monads have no awareness whatsoever of the unfolding of their perceptions, and thus have no control over that toward which they tend by nature.<sup>17</sup> Still, their activity is a striving toward the perfection that befits their form and is explained by their own internal principles. All monads, no matter how lowly, are agents striving to attain their own perfection and the perfection of the entire universe.<sup>18</sup>

Though all substances act, only animals move themselves to action, and only rational animals or minds act morally (i.e. freely and deliberately).<sup>19</sup> For example, in virtue of their sensitive capacities and memory, animals share with minds the capacities to develop more distinct perceptions and therefore to experience pleasure and pain and move themselves accordingly. Leibniz's stock example is that of a dog running away from the stick with which it has been beaten by its master. The dog remembers the pain it has come to associate with the stick and flees. The dog is limited to this capacity to remember past experiences, and in particular to remember that a typical effect of a stick in the hands of its master is a beating. However, the dog cannot have general knowledge of cause and effect, in part because it cannot reflect upon his experiences in the manner requisite for such general causal knowledge. Since it cannot take the reflective and critical distance necessary to understand and meaningfully change the situation, the dog has no choice but to flee the stick to avoid the pain it associates with it.<sup>20</sup> So the

<sup>13</sup>AG 66/G VI.462.

<sup>14</sup>AG 42/G VI.434.

<sup>15</sup>AG 208/G VI.599–600.

<sup>16</sup>AG 209/G VI.603.

<sup>17</sup>AG 216/G VI.611.

<sup>18</sup>NE 210.

<sup>19</sup>NE 210.

<sup>20</sup>AG 216/G VI.611; AG 208/G VI.600.

dog, though it is a self-mover, is not a mind. The reflective standpoint the dog lacks is a necessary condition for the voluntary, willed, or free action of minds.<sup>21</sup> Mere animals cannot be said to act deliberately or intentionally.<sup>22</sup>

This possibility of taking up an essentially reflective point of view is the basis of Leibniz's theory of appetite as volition in rational animals.<sup>23</sup> Indeed, as we shall come to see, our ability to act in accordance with our rational judgments is the most important sense in which we humans (qua monads) express or mirror the divine essence.<sup>24</sup> This capacity to act reflectively and in accordance with rational judgment is what Leibniz calls the capacity for will.

It is against the background of this theory of substance and active striving that we should understand Leibniz's affirmation of the Aristotelian-Scholastic conception of the will as an appetitive power that is constitutively aimed at or inclined toward the universal good. Leibniz describes the will as "the effort or endeavor [*conatus*] to move toward what one finds good and away from what one finds bad, the endeavor arising immediately out of one's awareness [apperception] of those things."<sup>25</sup> It is a condition of voluntary action that one is aware of the end toward which one is directed, and that one has a capacity to reflect upon this directedness. Because the will is rational in this way, it tends not simply to particular goods, but "the good in general [*bien en général*]" and consequently "must strive after the perfection that befits us [*la perfection qui nous convient*]."<sup>26</sup> The will is so inclined because its object is given to it by the intellect, which apprehends an object of choice as that which is truly best on the whole, given a particular set of circumstances.

In the *Theodicy*, Leibniz casts his theory of will in Scholastic terms: he defines it as an appetitive power whose formal object is the universal good. In that text, he affirms the traditional conception of the understanding as a power to know the truth and the will as a power to realize the good. He argues that the understanding can never assent to a proposition unless it appears to be true, because the natural

---

<sup>21</sup>This capacity is crucial to Leibniz's distinction between mere "appetitions" and "volitions." The former arise from insensible perceptions of which we are not aware, but volitions necessarily involve awareness, "for one describes as 'voluntary' only actions one can be aware of and can reflect upon when they arise from some consideration of good and bad; though there are also appetitions of which one can be aware" (*NE* 173).

<sup>22</sup>*NE* 129; *AG* 65–66/*G* IV.460. Sometimes Leibniz appears to attribute apperception to animals, but whatever he meant by this attribution, it does not appear to be the kind of reflection at issue here. A good discussion of these difficult exegetical issues can be found in Kulstad, "Leibniz, Animals, and Apperception."

<sup>23</sup>It is also crucial to his account of freedom, in a specifically practical sense. Leibniz admits that from a God's eye point of view—what we might call the infallible third-person perspective—all of my actions are certain and determined. God has a priori knowledge of the complete analysis of the concept of [Jennifer Frey], and so knows everything that I will ever do before I do it. Nevertheless, I am still an agent faced with choices about the best course of action according to my own determination of their relative worth. This is the reason Leibniz insists that the metaphysics of freedom is irrelevant to the moralist, just as the composition of the continuum is irrelevant to the geometer. What we might reasonably call this *practical* conception of freedom is important to his notion of will and action, and has been sorely neglected in the literature on the problem of freedom in Leibniz' thought. See *AG* 43/*G* IV.435.

<sup>24</sup>*AG* 65–66/*G* VI.461–62.

<sup>25</sup>*NE* 173.

<sup>26</sup>*T* 142/*G* VI.122.

inclination of the intellect is to tend to things under the formal object of truth.<sup>27</sup> He likewise contends that the will cannot seek an end that does not appear to it to be good, given that the will is a natural inclination to pursue an end under its formal object (universal good).<sup>28</sup> It follows from this conception of the will that a perception (in our case, a rational judgment) of goodness is always logically (though not necessarily temporally) prior to an act of will. Thus an agent acts only in pursuit of objects that appear to him to be good or desirable to pursue in a general way, that is, in accordance with a general understanding of what is good, not simply in this particular situation, but in light of one's general, reflective understanding of the good as applied to this particular situation, here and now.<sup>29</sup>

To summarize, for Leibniz all agents (monads) are essentially active substances that strive to realize the perfection that befits them through perceptions and appetitions. Human beings are minds because they strive to realize their perfection in a more perfect way: through rational perceptions and voluntary actions. As minds, human beings are self-aware, reflective, and free.

Although all monads mirror God to some degree, through reason and will we mirror God in an especially close way. Leibniz's God is not a completely other, hidden, or absolutely transcendent being; in fact, Leibniz thinks we can understand how God wills if we grasp the rational principles that determine it as a perfected appetitive power.<sup>30</sup> God's will is a perfect rational appetite, different from ours only in that it is not subject to the limitations of finitude. An understanding of God's will, then, will help us to answer the question of whether Leibniz's rational psychology is egoist.

## 2.2 *Divine Agency*

Leibniz's account of divine or perfectly rational agency is clearest in his discussions of voluntarism. Though we could turn to numerous sources for the voluntarist position, the following passage from Descartes sums up nicely the picture of divine agency that Leibniz is determined to refute:

[I]t is impossible to imagine that anything is thought of in the divine intellect as good or true, or worthy of belief or action or omission, *prior to the decision of the divine will to make it so*. . . . [T]here is not even any priority of order, or nature, or "rationally determined reason" as they call it, such that God's idea of the good impelled him to choose one thing rather than another. (CSM II.291/AT VII.431–32, emphasis added)

For Descartes, even the origin of mathematical truths can be traced back to an act of divine will. It follows naturally that God willed the world as it is not because he perceived that it is best, any more than he willed that the three angles of a triangle should be equal to two right angles because he perceived the impossibility of its contrary; rather, it is *because* God willed to create the world in this way that the

<sup>27</sup>T 314/G VI.300–301.

<sup>28</sup>T 136/G VI.116.

<sup>29</sup>This is not to say that Leibniz thinks the will is absolutely *determined* by the understanding. His arguments against Bayle in the *Theodicy* make it reasonably clear he does not think this; see T 313–14/G VI.299–300.

<sup>30</sup>AG 35/G IV.427.

world is in fact good, and it is *because* God willed the nature of a triangle to be as it is that its contrary is impossible. To say otherwise is to place a standard or measure external to God, which would limit his powers. This is impossible, since God, as an omnipotent being, is necessarily of unlimited power. Omnipotence demands that what is good and what is true must be products of his volitions, since the will is the power to create what is external to God, and all norms must be external to him qua omnipotent being.

The voluntarist can countenance absolutely no constraints on his conception of omnipotence, because any constraint would be, by definition, a limitation of his power, and thus a denial of genuine omnipotence. If the voluntarist follows this thought through to its logical conclusion, then he must say, as Descartes sometimes does, that God's power cannot be subject even to rational constraints. If it pleased him, the voluntarist God could think a contradiction, or he could command that the innocent be damned to eternal suffering. This is because what is true is so just in case God willed it to be so, and likewise what is good (and indeed, what is best) is so just in case God willed it to be that way.

For Leibniz, voluntarism is morally, theologically, and metaphysically unacceptable.<sup>31</sup> Metaphysically, it is unacceptable because it cannot be squared with his perfectionism, which informs his theory of will as a rational appetite. In the case of God, because the substance in question is perfect, the power is *perfectly* rational. Leibniz argues,

God's will is determined only by the preponderating goodness of the object. This is therefore not a defect where God and the Saints are concerned: on the contrary, it would be a great defect, or rather a manifest absurdity, were it otherwise, even in men here on earth, and if they were capable of acting without any inclining reason. (T 148/G VI.128)

God's will can only be good if it is ordered to what God knows is best. This is a conceptual truth that follows from the very idea of appetite as a power that follows perception insofar as it gets its object from perception. The perfect goodness of God's will, his omnibenevolence, does not consist in its essential indifference as the voluntarist had argued, but in the fact that it desires what is in fact truly and perfectly *desirable*. And what is most desirable from Leibniz's rationalist metaphysics is the maximization of the perfection of the whole as far as this is possible in accordance with rational principles. God, like any monad, tends to the perfection that befits him; God, as perfect monad, tends to the maximum good of the whole in the best way. Leibniz argues that God "would fail in what he owes to his wisdom, his goodness, his perfection, if he followed not the grand result of all his tendencies to good, and if he chose not that which is absolutely the best."<sup>32</sup>

---

<sup>31</sup>In the *Theodicy*, for instance, Leibniz argues that the voluntarist position reflects a Thrasymachian conception of justice as what pleases the most powerful; see T 59/G VI.35. Theologically, he worries that we have no reason to praise or worship a being that is indifferent as to whether the innocent are rewarded or damned; see AG 36/G VI.428.

<sup>32</sup>T 138/G VI.117.

To understand how the maximization of perfection is accomplished, we must remember that Leibniz identifies three species of good: metaphysical, physical, and moral. Metaphysical good is most basic, as it is associated with reality, being, or essence; physical goodness is associated with pleasure and pains, and is only found in animals that have powers of sensation; and moral goodness is associated with the virtuous action that flows from deliberative desire, and only found in agents with a power of will.<sup>33</sup> It is clear that physical good and moral good are ultimately explained by the powers of perception and appetite of the substances in question, and thus is ultimately grounded in metaphysical goodness, or the goodness of being or substance: "Power relates to being, wisdom or understanding to truth, and will to good."<sup>34</sup> Power is explained by being or substance, and substance is explained by capacities of perception and appetite. Since appetite follows perception, this means that God's power is ultimately located in his wisdom, reason, or intellect.

That God's power is located ultimately in his intellect is clear from his explanation of God as the intelligent cause of the actual world. Leibniz argues that God is the intelligible cause of the world insofar as this world can be understood to be the one that maximizes metaphysical perfection.<sup>35</sup> The best possible world is the one that maximizes both variety and orderliness, and is governed by the simplest laws. Leibniz argues,

It follows from the supreme perfection of God that he chose the best possible plan in producing the universe, a plan in which there is the greatest variety together with the greatest order. The most carefully used plot of ground, place, and time; the greatest effect produced by the simplest means; the most power, knowledge, happiness, and goodness in created things that the universe could allow. For, since all the possibles have a claim to existence in God's understanding in proportion to their perfections, the result of all these claims must be the most perfect actual world possible. And without this, it would not be possible to give a reason for why things have turned out in this way than otherwise. (AG 210/G VI.603)

This is a frankly metaphysical conception of the best possible world. From an ethical point of view, we might wonder where virtue and happiness enter into it. The amount of virtue and happiness that exists, Leibniz assures us, is the greatest amount that could be allowed, given the need to combine variety with order and harmony. Leibniz's famous principle of perfection states that the greater the variety and the more harmoniously and simply that variety is arranged in the world, the greater is the perfection of the whole universe, and this principle of ordering parts to the whole is what governs God's choice, because it is what constitutes the best or most desirable world. What results is a choice that is explained primarily in metaphysical rather than moral terms. But this simply follows from Leibniz's metaphysical account of value. Order and harmony are intrinsically pleasing to minds or rational substances.

---

<sup>33</sup>Though the three kinds of goods can be separated (there is no physical good in God or Angels, and no moral good in plants or brutes), they are all essentially interrelated in the perfection of human beings qua rational animal.

<sup>34</sup>*T* 127/G VI.106.

<sup>35</sup>This has also been emphasized by Rutherford, chap. 2.

This explanation of God's creative act also shows that God's perfections are primarily understood in terms of perfect intelligence, which is logically prior to the perfection of his will and substance. Leibniz argues that God is omniscient insofar as his perceptions are always clear and distinct (and thus perceives what is best); that he is omnibenevolent because his will never fails to conform to this knowledge; and that he is omnipotent because he always perfectly exercises these two capacities together without any impediment to bring about the perfection of his own nature. The perfect exercise of these two powers characterizes his omnipotence, which is the perfect, unchecked, and uninhibited power of his substance in act.<sup>36</sup>

A careful analysis of God's perfections shows that Leibniz's God is omnipotent and yet still constrained or bound by genuine norms, as all substances are. God alone has the power to create anything other than himself, since nothing other than he can exist unless he freely chooses to exercise this power. At the same time, the eternal ideas or essences of things exist in his understanding, and partly constitute it God judges (without error) what is best from among these ideas, and his judgment is constrained by norms of truth and goodness that constitute the powers of perception and appetite that he exercises perfectly.

*Pace* the voluntarists, Leibniz does not think an appeal to such constraints diminishes God's power. To the contrary, given his Aristotelian conception of powers, Leibniz thinks that God's power cannot be coherently articulated without an appeal to some idea of an internal constraint or norms: an exercise of a power is defined by its formal object, which specifies its end and perfection. The end defines a measure for the exercise of the power; without a conception of an internal standard of excellence or defect for its exercise, there is no way to describe any of its operation as good or bad, because there is no way to define it as a power at all. A power is always a power to do *something*, some specifically defined activity. We cannot think of *power simpliciter* Leibniz argues, for such a power might equally be a power to destroy oneself, or a power to be blind, which is nonsense.<sup>37</sup> A power to err or to destroy oneself is no power at all. But if the power to destroy oneself is really *no power at all*, we should say the same of a putative "power" to violate the law of non-contradiction, which would be a power that destroys all thought, or the power to will anything, which would be a power that destroys all willing. For Leibniz, these are no powers at all, as they have no internal principle of specification or measure.

These brief reflections on Leibniz's rejection of voluntarism help to bring out four points crucial to understanding his theory of rational agency. First, all substances move toward their own perfection on account of internal, end-oriented principles, and this is most especially true of the perfect monad, God. Second, goodness of will in general is derived from the goodness of intellect, and the goodness of intellect from grasping true perceptions of what is best on the whole, in accordance with rational principles. Thus God's goodness flows from his wisdom (and by extension, so does ours, though imperfectly, as we are prone to error).

---

<sup>36</sup>AG 35/G IV.427.

<sup>37</sup>T 365 (G VI.357).

Third, the concept of pleasure in a being with intellect cannot be comprehended in absence of its perception of what is best on the whole. God, by creating the world that is the best possible world, does what is most pleasing to him. But what pleases him is what he rationally perceives as best, as most harmonious and well ordered. He acts for the sake of realizing this order, not for the sake of his pleasure. So God is not an egoist or a hedonist; he is not, like Milton's Satan, hell-bent on seeking his own glory. Rather, he seeks to communicate his glory or his perfections by creating the best possible world. This act pleases him, to be sure, but it pleases because it is the best; it is not the best because it pleases him, and he does not seek it for that end.

### 2.3 *Meta-ethical Egoism?*

Leibniz's theory of rational agency is deeply rooted in his metaphysics of substance. One might be tempted, therefore, to find evidence for this within his thesis about the will formally aimed at the good. Following Scott MacDonald, we might call such a view "meta-ethical egoism."<sup>38</sup> Meta-ethical egoism, according to MacDonald, is the view that all substances necessarily seek their own perfection through the actualization of their own specific powers and potentialities. MacDonald discusses this view in relation to Aquinas, but it is easy to see how it can be transferred to Leibniz (or anyone with a metaphysics of substantial form), since he too thinks that substances have inclinations or tendencies to realize the perfections inherent to their substantial forms.

Though it is certainly true that Leibniz holds that all human beings (like all substances) are inclined to seek their own perfection through the exercise of natural powers, I think it is a category mistake to call this idea a form of egoism.<sup>39</sup> Egoism is a claim about how to explain actions, and it says that the explanation of action necessarily involves the identification not simply of an appetite, but of an appetite that is essentially self-directed in that it only takes the subject's own ends as its object. This is true of all forms of egoism (ethical or rational egoism both state that one *ought* to act this way, but make no empirical or descriptive claim about how we in fact act). If we did not put the emphasis on the self-directed character of the appetites in question, there would be no reason why we should not call plants or starfish egoist agents, since they too are naturally inclined seek their own perfection by attaining the ends specific to their substantial forms. Of course, it is silly to call a plant or a starfish an egoist, but it will be useful for our purposes to get especially clear about the reasons why.<sup>40</sup>

<sup>38</sup>MacDonald, "Egoistic Rationalism: Aquinas's Basis for Christian Morality," 331.

<sup>39</sup>By "category mistake," I mean to invoke the concept originally defined by Gilbert Ryle, who argues that category mistakes are made "by people who do not know how to wield the concepts," or by people who do know the concepts but "are still liable in their abstract thinking to allocate those concepts to logical types to which they do not belong" (*The Concept of Mind*, 17). I see MacDonald as falling into the latter camp.

<sup>40</sup>We do not need to attribute desires to generate the problem of "meta-ethical egoism." All we need is the idea of a natural power as a tendency for a specifiable end. For a reasonable conception of such a view by contemporary philosophers, see Foot, *Natural Goodness*, chap. 2; Thompson, *Life and Action*, chap. 1; and Boyle and Lavin, "Goodness and Desire," in *Desire, Practical Reason, and the Good*, chap. 8.

To that end, we should remember that, for Leibniz (as for the Aristotelian Scholastics), there is no substance or unified being without an attribution of substantial form. The concept of substantial form is just what defines a thing as the substance it is, as opposed to anything else: it specifies some bit of matter as organized to be a this-kind-of-thing as opposed to something else or nothing at all (a mere heap or collection of particles). A living thing, to be sure, is more than a collection of particles: a living thing is a substantial unity of powers ordered by a single end, living as an X, where X is a species of living thing (a tomato, a starfish, or a human being). To say that the thing naturally strives for the fullest and most complete actualization or exemplification of its form is just to say what it is for that thing to exist as the sort of thing it is. This is its primary sense of substantial form: to be a definite or specific kind of thing. Now, a substantial form naturally strives to attain and maintain itself perfectly or completely, even though it will likely fail, and thus be an imperfect rather than a perfect exemplification of its kind. In light of this failure, we can also see that the concept of substantial form contains within itself a standard of goodness or perfection: *x* is good insofar as it effectively realizes its own being or *x*-hood.

Nothing about this metaphysics of substantial form is necessarily selfish or self-directed, which is necessary if it is to be egoist. The account is formal, and at a formal level it only says that monads naturally seek to become what they are most completely or fully. But doing so might require self-less actions and self-sacrifice for the sake of the well-being of the whole; this is certainly true for many social animals like bees, ants, and wolves. And if Leibniz is right about justice, it is equally true for rational and social creatures such as ourselves. Nothing about the formal metaphysics of substance that Leibniz articulates in his theory of monads speaks for or against egoism, since this metaphysics is compatible with different accounts of motivational psychology.

It changes nothing that Leibniz's account of volitions (or rational appetitions) is often cast as an inclination to pleasure, insofar as the satisfaction of any volition brings pleasure with it. For again, it is built into the very idea of a capacity as an inclination to a specific end—truth on the part of the intellect, the good on the part of the will—that it is simultaneously inclined to that end and that pleasure attends to that end once attained. But the pleasure is just what accompanies the perfected exercise of the power; pleasure does not define the power as its end or dictate its specific underlying motivational force. We ought not confuse the inherent teleology of power—its perfected act—with that which accompanies the act as a sign of its perfected condition.<sup>41</sup> There is a difference between the fact that it is pleasing to rest in the end once attained and the reasons or motives for the sake of which the end itself is sought.

---

<sup>41</sup>An example of this confusion can be found in Youpa, "Leibniz's Ethics." Youpa argues that Leibniz is a psychological egoist, but that since it turns out that virtue is in our enlightened self-interest, this poses no problems for ethics. Although Youpa recognizes that Leibniz distinguishes pleasures involved in the satisfaction of desire from the object of that desire, he sees this as a sign that psychological egoism and an ethics of altruism can be reconciled, rather than as evidence that Leibniz was no egoist. But if my arguments work, this is to look for evidence of egoism where it cannot in principle be found.

These reflections point us to a philosophical truth about egoism in general that the standard reading often misses. In order for an agent to be called an egoist, he must not only be able to take account of the good of others over against his own, but also always reject the good of others in favor of what he takes to be his own.<sup>42</sup> Unless there is an intellectual separation of one's own good from the good of others, coupled with a genuine inability to act for the sake of another's good, then any talk of egoism is misplaced. This is another reason why talk of egoist starfish is just silly. And yet a starfish is an agent that acts for the sake of its own perfection all the same.

Now, of course, a rational creature can compare its own good with that of others in a way that plants and other animals cannot (thus it has volitions and not just appetitions), so we have not yet discharged our duty to show that the standard reading is generally false. The point here is just that nothing about an appeal to the metaphysics of a rational appetite settles the question one way or another, because nothing about the logic of the metaphysics of substance could settle the question of whether human motives or desires are self-directed in the relevant sort of way. Thus, while Leibniz's commitment to natural teleology does entail that reason is the principle of our own substantial form or being, and that we have a natural tendency to seek the perfection of our own essence as this is rationally (i.e. apperceptively) perceived, and that when we do so this is pleasing to us, it does not entail that our ends are necessarily opposed to the welfare of others, or that our motives are necessarily selfish. After all, if human goodness just consists in acting for the sake of another's welfare, as Leibniz so often insists, then truly selfish motives will be incompatible with the pursuit of human happiness.<sup>43</sup> Consequently, we cannot derive psychological egoism from Leibniz's theory of agency and will. If it can be articulated at all, the thesis must come through his substantive conception of human goodness or perfection and the virtues necessary to attain that end. In order to prove that Leibniz was an egoist, it must be shown that he held that human goodness can only be rationally perceived in terms of the agent's own good in contrast and opposition to the good of others. In the next two sections I will show that Leibniz did not understand the rational pursuit of human goodness in this way, and thus was not in fact an egoist.

### 3. GOODNESS, PLEASURE, AND VIRTUE

It may still be that Leibniz is an egoist, for he might have a conception of human happiness in which happiness consists in the satisfaction of all and only self-

<sup>42</sup>Thomas Nagel makes this point forcefully in *The Possibility of Altruism*, 79–89.

<sup>43</sup>MacDonald ("Egoistic Rationalism: Aquinas's Basis for Christian Morality") considers this objection, and argues that it does not save Aquinas (and by extension, Leibniz) from the charge of meta-ethical egoism, because it shows, not that human beings do not necessarily seek their own self-interest, but that their own self-interest is not narrowly individualistic. But this is only a plausible move if we are considering a psychological, rather than a "meta-ethical" egoism. If I can only act for the perfection of my neighbor and the universe if I can see a direct connection to my own welfare, then I am clearly an egoist. But meta-ethical egoism does not insist that the connection be psychological, but merely metaphysical. But if I can act for the sake of someone else's good, then it should not matter if, on the final analysis, this also happens to square (necessarily) with my own. All that should matter is that I did it for the sake of someone else's good, without a care for my own well-being.

directed desires. Nothing said so far settles this question one way or another, and we must look at his substantive conception of human happiness in order to reach a definitive conclusion. It will aid our reflections if we briefly review his theory of value, on which his account of happiness ultimately rests.

As already noted, Leibniz identifies three species of the good: metaphysical (goodness of being), physical (goodness of pleasure), and moral (goodness of will or virtue). Although there are three species of the good, in the end all three notions are ultimately grounded in his perfectionist metaphysics. Pleasure too seems to straddle all three divisions in interesting ways. One cannot help but notice how often Leibniz mentions pleasure when he turns to his account of the good. We sometimes find him speak of “the good” as that which “is apt to cause or increase pleasure, or diminish pain in us” and evil as that which “is apt to produce or increase any pain, or diminish any pleasure in us.”<sup>44</sup> This general definition of good and bad squares with his accounts of moral goodness in general as “a feeling of pleasure” that arises from “a perception of beauty, order, and perfection.”<sup>45</sup> Beauty and order, moreover, are always ultimately kinds of harmony of being. Even his most nuanced discussions of moral goodness center around the concept of pleasure. For example, in the *New Essays*, Leibniz writes,

The good is divided into the virtuous, the pleasing, and the useful; though I believe that fundamentally something good must either be pleasing in itself [*agréable lui même*] or conducive to something else which can give us a pleasant feeling [*sentiment agréable*]. That is, the good is either pleasing or useful; and virtue itself consists in a pleasure of the mind [*plaisir d’esprit*]. (*NE* 162)

In this passage we see that Leibniz recognizes the traditional scholastic division of value into three basic categories: the virtuous (goodness of will), the pleasing (goodness of sensual appetites), and the useful (instrumental goods). Yet all goods are either pleasing in themselves, or pleasing because they get us something else that is pleasing.

It can be difficult to reconcile various presentations of the good in Leibniz’s corpus. In the *Theodicy* he appears to equate pleasure with bodily or physical good whereas in the *New Essays* he appears to reduce virtue to a pleasure of the mind in a way that makes him sound as if he thinks that the highest good—virtue—is identical with a certain kind of pleasure.

It strikes me that a reconciliation of these two texts is on offer, but it requires that we place the concept of metaphysical perfection (or the goodness of being) at the heart of the account. This is not difficult, since it is clear that Leibniz takes perfection to be both the *measure* and *cause* of pleasure.

Leibnizian pleasures are twofold: bodily and rational (a bare monad could not experience pleasures, but an angelic being or God could, though they lack bodies). Bodily pleasures, which constitute the sphere of physical good, can be either insensible inclinations (of which the agent is not at all aware), or sensible inclinations (of which the agent is aware, but whose objects are not perceived clearly

<sup>44</sup>*NE* 162.

<sup>45</sup>*G* VII 290.

and distinctly). The pleasures proper to the mind, however, require knowledge, for they “consist in the knowledge of perfections through their reasons.”<sup>46</sup> Rational pleasures (*plaisirs d’esprit*) consist of knowledge of perfections. This is not to say that knowledge is identical to pleasure—a view that would be hard to make heads or tails of—but rather that the activity of knowing perfection is an intrinsically pleasing one. It is the pleasure that Leibniz associates with the act of penetrating “the reason of the reason of perfections.”<sup>47</sup>

That knowledge is intrinsically pleasing to rational natures comes out in Leibniz’s discussion of moral goodness, as this is reflected by God’s omnibenevolent choice to create the best possible world and in the just man’s choice to look after the common good. Reflection on both will help us see how all three notions of the good and the two corresponding conceptions of pleasure are ultimately grounded in Leibniz’s conception of metaphysical perfection.

Let us turn first to God’s choice and the principle of perfection, for God’s choice to create this world is for Leibniz an expression of his perfect moral goodness. As we have already seen, the best world for Leibniz is the one that maximizes both variety and orderliness; it is “the simplest in hypotheses and the richest in phenomena.”<sup>48</sup> Leibniz’s famous principle of perfection states that the greater the variety and the more harmoniously and simply that variety is arranged, the greater is the perfection of the whole.<sup>49</sup> Indeed, he sometimes seems to equate perfection with harmony, as when he writes to Christian Wolff:

Perfection is the harmony of things, or the state where everything is worthy of being observed, that is, the state of agreement [*consensus*] or identity in variety; you can even say that it is the degree of contemplability [*considerabilitas*]. (AG 233–34/G VI.630)

The contemplation of harmony and order is the contemplation of metaphysical perfection, and this kind of perception is intrinsically pleasing to rational minds.

True to his rationalist sensibilities, Leibniz denigrates mere bodily pleasures and extols the *plaisirs d’esprit*. First, bodily pleasures can be deceptive; for example, the pleasant aroma of some foods mask their poisonous nature. Leibniz takes these cases to show that all bodily pleasures are confused to some extent, inherently untrustworthy, and therefore bad grounds for the will. Second, bodily pleasures are by their very nature fleeting and transient, and ultimately leave a rational nature feeling dissatisfied.<sup>50</sup> Third, God presumably does not know bodily pleasures, so they simply cannot be the highest or best kind. Even the bodily pleasures associated with music, which are grounded in the perception of the principles of harmony and are the closest to the pleasures of the mind, are to be feared if used too often.<sup>51</sup>

The pleasures of the mind, by contrast, are neither deceptive nor transient; to the contrary, Leibniz describes them as “the purest, and of the greatest service in making joy endure.”<sup>52</sup> Such pleasures are intrinsically well suited to rational

<sup>46</sup>R 84/GR II.581.

<sup>47</sup>R 84/GR II.581.

<sup>48</sup>AG 39/G IV.431.

<sup>49</sup>AG 210/G VI.603.

<sup>50</sup>T 142/G VI.121.

<sup>51</sup>R 83/GR II.580.

<sup>52</sup>T 282/G VI.267.

natures and an integral component of their perfection. The more clearly, distinctly, and constantly a mind perceives some perfection, the more it experiences lasting pleasure, such as the joy and happiness it takes in consistent acts of virtue.

The grounding in perfection also comes out in his account of human virtue. Like God's free choice to create the best possible world, moral goodness in human beings also necessarily involves an appeal to both pleasure and perfection. Leibniz defines virtue as "a habit of acting according to reason"<sup>53</sup> or "according to wisdom."<sup>54</sup> Because virtues "serve the perfection and prevent the imperfection of those who are virtuous,"<sup>55</sup> and since pleasure is a perception of perfection, it is built into the nature of the concept of the virtues that the activity they bring forth be *intrinsically pleasing* to rational minds.

Virtuous action serves the perfection of rational creatures, and thus leads to the attainment of their happiness, which "is a lasting pleasure" and "a state of permanent joy."<sup>56</sup> Only when we, as rational creatures, have trained our wills to be good and exhibit the virtues will we experience the right kinds of pleasure: the pleasure that contributes to the perfection of our nature as human beings. Therefore, only the well-ordered mind of the person whose will has been trained to perceive the virtuous action and find it pleasing can possibly attain happiness and perfection.

Though virtue is part of our nature as rational creatures, we are not born virtuous; rather, we must develop virtue as we acquire knowledge or wisdom. Knowledge must rule our passions and our insensible inclinations so that virtue becomes "a pleasure and second nature to us."<sup>57</sup> The virtuous condition is one in which reason orders the soul, such that those pleasures most appropriate to our rational natures—the pleasures we achieve when virtue has become like a second nature to us—are what we take our happiness to consist in. For, as Leibniz argues in *The Common Concept of Justice*, the cultivation of justice is a certain "serenity of spirit" that finds "the greatest pleasure in virtue and the greatest evil in vice, that is, in the perfection or imperfection of the will." Leibniz further argues that such serenity is "the greatest good of which man is capable."<sup>58</sup> And he is clear that the just person is capable of having such a disposition, "even if he had nothing to expect beyond this life, for what can one prefer to this interior harmony, to this continual pleasure of the purest and greatest things, of which one is always the master, and which one could not abandon?"<sup>59</sup> The perfection of man consists in the perfection of his will or rational appetite; to attain this perfection of will, man must learn to take pleasure in virtue *for its own sake*, and not for the sake of anything else. The virtuous man cannot seek virtue for the sake of pleasure; on the contrary, he must seek virtue knowing that it is intrinsically valuable. Again, this knowledge is knowledge of a kind of harmony or perfection, rather than knowledge of what satisfies his own subjective inclinations.

<sup>53</sup>R 105/A IV.615.

<sup>54</sup>R 83/GR II.579.

<sup>55</sup>T 240/G VI.222–23.

<sup>56</sup>NE 195.

<sup>57</sup>NE 188, emphasis added. Leibniz also emphasizes second nature in R 106/A IV.615.

<sup>58</sup>R 58/M 73.

<sup>59</sup>R 58/M 73.

Perfection turns up at every turn in this account of moral goodness. Virtues perfect and lead one to experience the right kinds of pleasures; virtues thereby perfect one's nature. In acting virtuously, one experiences the right kinds of pleasures, and one maximizes the perfection of one's being.<sup>60</sup> The concept of pleasure, for Leibniz, is grounded in his metaphysical perfectionism, and thus his concept of moral goodness is ultimately grounded in his concept of metaphysical goodness. Thus it is not surprising that his theory of virtue and happiness are elucidated in terms familiar from his perfectionist metaphysics. The exercise of virtue is intrinsically pleasing because the virtuous agent recognizes in his action an increase in his own perfection, the perfection of others, and thereby the perfection of the universe. Virtue leads one to happiness—a lasting and stable pleasure of the mind that is brought about through one's perception of “a great harmony, order, freedom, power, or perfection.”<sup>61</sup> Our perception of this order *motivates* one to imitate or duplicate the order of reasons in our actions.<sup>62</sup>

This helps to explain why Leibniz would conceive of wisdom as “the science of happiness,” since it turns out that this consists in the knowledge of the perfections of the universe. Happiness requires knowledge of perfection, because the virtues strive for perfection, and a virtuous life contributes to the overall perfection of the universe. “For it is one of the eternal laws of nature that we shall enjoy the perfection of things and the pleasure which results from it only in the measure of our knowledge, our good will, and our contribution to this perfection.”<sup>63</sup>

Now, this emphasis on pleasure might tempt us to think that Leibniz's position advocates a sophisticated psychological hedonism: the idea that all action is ultimately motivated by the desire for pleasure or the aversion to pain.<sup>64</sup> This would be one familiar gloss on the claim that we are fundamentally egoists, and interpreters have long read Leibniz in this way.

We already know that Leibniz is not a straightforward hedonist: he does not think that the highest good is pleasure; rather, the highest good is a kind of knowledge of perfection. Nevertheless, the attainment or the exercise of the perfection of the power is intrinsically pleasing to the agent who possesses the power, and so knowledge is intrinsically pleasing to rational minds. But on this account perfection is not identical to the pleasure that perfection brings about, because pleasure depends on something objective and independent of itself. So we find Leibniz argue that

when I say, ‘that pleases me’, it is as though I were saying, ‘I find it good’. Thus it is the ideal goodness of the object which pleases [*la bonté ideale de l'objet qui plaît*], and which makes me choose it among many others which do not please or which please less, that is to say, which contain less of that goodness which moves me. (*TR*83/*G*VI.163)

---

<sup>60</sup>Of course, given our finitude, our being remains necessarily imperfect.

<sup>61</sup>L 426/*G* VII.86.

<sup>62</sup>R 84/*GR* II.581.

<sup>63</sup>L 427/*G* VII.87.

<sup>64</sup>Loemker takes Leibniz to be such a hedonist, since he reads Leibniz as committed to the idea that it is the feeling of pleasure that determines the value of things. But if the argument of this section is correct, then this gets the order of explanation backwards. See Loemker, *Leibniz: Philosophical Papers and Letters*, 46–48.

Here we find Leibniz saying that one is moved directly by one's perception of the good, and that what it is to be *pleased* is to find it good in the sense that we perceive some variety of perfection in it. Leibniz is careful to note that it is the ideal goodness of the object that moves the good will to action, and that the perception of this ideal goodness is what brings about pleasure. It is a mistake to call this a form of egoistic hedonism, for that would require that the object of the will be an anticipated or expected pleasure. But this is hardly Leibniz's view.

Both God and the virtuous man are motivated by the desire for perfection. Of God's motives, Leibniz writes that "we cannot envisage in God any other motive than that of perfection, or if you like, his pleasure, supposing that pleasure is nothing but a feeling of perfection . . . for his goodness would not be supreme, if he did not aim at the good and at perfection so far as possible."<sup>65</sup> He further observes that this same motive [of perfection] has a place in truly virtuous and generous men, whose supreme function is to imitate divinity."<sup>66</sup> This *motive of perfection*, Leibniz argues, "makes [the virtuous man] find so much pleasure in the exercise of justice and so much ugliness in unjust actions, that other pleasures and displeasures are obliged to give way."<sup>67</sup> This is what Leibniz insists that perfection of the will consists in, "to find the greatest pleasure in virtue and the greatest evil in vice."<sup>68</sup> If we keep in mind that pleasure comes about through the perception of the value or perfection of thing that pleases, then finding pleasure in virtue is the same thing as perceiving its true value or perfection.

It is worth considering an objection to the arguments I have been making so far.<sup>69</sup> The objection is that my reading depends upon a conception of pleasure that is contentious and does not fit well with the texts I am citing. As I have mentioned, Leibniz often defines pleasures of the mind as the perception or representation of perfection. If we take this definition seriously, one might think it follows that knowledge of perfection, as an intellectual representation of perfection, is identical to pleasure. In places, such as the pithy "Felicity," Leibniz defines pleasure as "a knowledge or feeling of perfection, not only in ourselves, but also in others, for in this way some further perfection is aroused in us."<sup>70</sup> Consequently, if Leibniz holds that we act for the sake of knowledge of perfection, and this knowledge is identical to pleasure—a *plaisir d'esprit*—then he also holds that we always act for the sake of this sort of higher pleasure, and Leibniz's psychology is hedonist after all.

My response to this argument is to point out, again, that volitions are determined by their objects—this grounds the distinction between bodily and mental pleasures—and what one seeks when one seeks anything through an act of will is some object specified by the intellect insofar as good. To say that one aims at pleasure is to confuse the object of the power itself with the pleasure one experiences upon perceiving or attaining the object. Though Leibniz is not always careful to draw these distinctions, the most charitable reading of his corpus will

---

<sup>65</sup>R 57/M 72.

<sup>66</sup>R 58/M 73.

<sup>67</sup>R 58/M 73.

<sup>68</sup>R 58/M 73.

<sup>69</sup>Thanks to Matt Kisner for bringing this objection to my attention.

<sup>70</sup>R 82/GR II.579.

show that he insists upon them, and for good reason. Moreover, in saying that pleasure is a perception of value or perfection, as he sometimes does, Leibniz seems to indicate that it would be a mistake to look for some separately intelligible thing—the pleasure—that can be identified apart from the perception of value that brings it into being. Pleasure, as Leibniz seems to understand it, is inherent in the act of perceiving the perfection. This would again bring Leibniz in line with the Aristotelian-Scholastic tradition on pleasure. Whatever we want to make of this account of pleasure, it would be a gross misunderstanding to equate it with hedonism. For a moral psychology to be hedonist, pleasure must be a separately identifiable *aim* of the agent; it must be that *for the sake of which* he acts, such that it makes sense to call him, at bottom, a pleasure seeker. It is abundantly clear that Leibniz does not hold this view; rather, he holds that the perception of that for the sake of which the agent does act—perfection—is inherently pleasurable to rational minds. To call such a view hedonistic is to say that knowledge is pleasure, rather than what Leibniz does say, which is that knowledge is pleasing to a being with powers of mind.

#### 4. PLEASURE AND JUSTICE

Let us turn now to the question of how pleasure plays a role in Leibniz's account of justice. Here again, we find that the motive of perfection is central to the explanation of why the just man acts as he does. What is most fundamental to Leibniz's theory of justice is that it is a form of charity, and so just actions must be performed from a motive of disinterested love.

Leibniz holds that justice is the virtue that regulates *philanthropos*, or love of man. Justice is "the charity of the wise man," and the wise man finds his pleasure in the general good of mankind. In his correspondence with Arnauld, Leibniz defines charity as a "universal benevolence, which the wise man carries into execution in conformity with the measures of reason, to the end of obtaining the greatest good."<sup>71</sup>

Love, in turn, is taking one's delight or pleasure in the happiness or increase in the perfection of another. Furthermore, Leibniz tells us that the love that motivates just action is disinterested. Leibniz has an especially clear discussion of this motive in his *Meditation on the Common Concept of Justice*. In this work, he considers three different motives one might have to be just. The first two motives—fear that others will harm us, and hope that others will repay us in kind—are improper and do not lead to the cultivation of justice. Leibniz characterizes them as merely "mercenary motives," because they are ultimately self-interested and consequently fail to bring forth acts of true charity. The only genuine motive of justice, Leibniz argues, is the motive of perfection. The supreme goodness of God consists in the fact that he aims at the good and perfection as far as this is possible. And we have already shown that perfection is intrinsically pleasing to him, *because* his will conforms to his wisdom. The same is true for virtuous men, insofar as they attain true justice.

<sup>71</sup>L 600/G II.137.

Leibniz is adamant that justice requires a uniquely moral motivation; otherwise we run the risk of instrumentalizing its value. Justice is intrinsically valuable, and so we must value it for its own sake and not for the sake of anything else it might bring us. Once again, we find him detaching pleasure in the account from self-interest. He writes,

I require a man to be virtuous, grateful, just, not from the motive of interest, of hope or of fear, but the pleasure that he should find in good actions: else one has not yet reached the degree of virtue that one must endeavor to attain. That is what one means by saying that justice and virtue must be loved for their own sake; and it is also what I explained in justifying “disinterested love” . . . Likewise, I consider that wickedness is all the greater when its practice becomes a pleasure, as when a highwayman, after having killed men when they resist, or because he fears their vengeance, finally grows cruel and takes pleasure in killing them, and even in making them suffer beforehand. Such a degree of wickedness is diabolical, even though the man affected with it finds in this execrable indulgence a stronger reason for his homicides than he had when he killed simply under the influence of hope or of fear. (*T* 422/*G* VI.402)

It would be a mistake to read this passage as an expression of Leibniz’s hedonistic egoism. What Leibniz is saying here is that when justice is a virtue and second nature to us—when it has come to be a constitutive feature of our character—we take our delight or pleasure in it; but the same is true of vice: we can come to take delight and find pleasure in that as well. So we cannot look to pleasure to settle the difference here between the good and the bad case, but rather must look to the object or ends that the agent is after. Thus the virtuous person cannot be described as a pleasure-seeking agent, though he does in fact take pleasure in what he does. Delight in justice simply is delight in *the good of others* rather than in something else, and this is the mark of true Christian charity. After all, it should not be unpleasant for us to seek the good of others; it will not be enough for Leibniz that the just man does his bitter duty. He must possess the *philia* that is the root of true justice. Moreover, finding pleasure in justice has theological implications, since Leibniz also thinks that a lack of pleasure in seeking another’s good is a sign that we do not properly love God. He writes,

For you should do good, through a pure pleasure in having done well, and, if you are not of this humor, you do not yet love God as you should; for the mark of the love of God is [seen] when one brings himself to the general good by a supreme ardor and by a pure movement of pleasure which one finds there, without other interest, as you might be pleased by a beautiful face, or in hearing a well-rehearsed concert, or in seeing a wicked and insolent person rebuffed, and a miserable innocent relieved, though you have no interest in him at all.<sup>72</sup>

True love is truly disinterested, on Leibniz’s view, not when it is dry or painful, but when it stems from an immediate pleasure in a perfection that is *objectively present* in the person, thing, or action loved. If that perfection is lacking, however, then the corresponding pleasure is bad and blameworthy. Leibniz is explicit that this love cannot be selfish or self-regarding in any way, since

<sup>72</sup>Translated and cited in Riley, *Leibniz’ Universal Jurisprudence: Justice as the Charity of the Wise*, 180 (F de C, II.542). My interpretation of Leibniz on virtue has been influenced by chap. 4 of Riley’s book.

when one sincerely loves a person, one is not seeking his own profit, nor a pleasure detached from that of the beloved person, but one seeks one's pleasure in the contentment or the felicity of that person; and if that felicity does not please in itself, but only because of an advantage which results for us, this would no longer be a pure and sincere love. It is necessary, then, that one find pleasure immediately in this happiness, and that one find pain in the unhappiness of the person loved; for all that which brings about pleasure immediately, by itself, is also desired for itself.<sup>73</sup>

Here, Leibniz is especially clear that what is sought for its own sake (the object) brings the seeker pleasure. If I love or value something in itself because I think it increases perfection, then this thing pleases me (and this pleasure might be good or bad, depending on whether the object is truly valuable). This is what Leibniz means, I take it, when he says that the perception of perfection is the feeling of pleasure: it brings pleasure about immediately, because it is loved in itself and seeking what is loved in itself is pleasing.

In this explanation of disinterested love, which is the genuine motives of the just agent, we find as definitive a rejection of psychological or hedonistic egoism by Leibniz as we could hope for. For the just person, the good or happiness of another is an end that pleases us in a necessarily non-instrumental and completely unselfish way; the good of others pleases us only insofar as we perceive it as an increase in perfection, in which we immediately take delight. And we ought to love things in accordance with the degree of perfection we see in them, as God does in his omnibenevolence, for this is the only way for us to truly strive for perfection.

We might sum up Leibniz's anti-hedonism in the following way. If the just man took pleasure as his end and highest good, then the highest pleasures he could attain would be closed off to him. For the lasting pleasures of happiness, those pleasures possessed by the wise and just man, are pleasures attained through the motives of disinterested love and perfection. Let us call this the paradox of hedonistic egoism: seeking pleasure cuts off man from his highest pleasure. Leibniz's view is not an instance of the paradox but shows us a way to resolve it. To do this we must reject hedonism and instead embrace the good of others as worthy of pursuit in itself.

## 5. CONCLUSION

In this paper, I have outlined an alternative reading of Leibniz's theory of agency that is neither egoist nor hedonist. The account grounds Leibniz's ethics in his perfectionist metaphysics of agency, according to which the perfection of rational minds lies in the attainment of knowledge of what is objectively good.

By way of a conclusion, I should acknowledge that it is no accident that the standard reading of Leibniz is that he was an egoist of some kind, as there are passages that seem to affirm it.<sup>74</sup> I will close by noting three things about these

<sup>73</sup>Letter to Nicaise (August 1697), cited in Naert, *Leibniz et la Querelle du Pur Amour* 64–65, and translated and cited in Riley, *Leibniz' Universal Jurisprudence: Justice as the Charity of the Wise*, 175.

<sup>74</sup>Examples of recent scholarship that place heavy emphasis on early works of Leibniz in order to demonstrate his egoism are Goldenbaum, "It's Love! Leibniz's Foundation of Natural Law as the Outcome of his Struggle with Hobbes' and Spinoza's Naturalism"; and Gregory Brown, "Disinterested Love: Understanding Leibniz's Reconciliation of Self- and Other-Regarding Motives."

textual sources. First, many of these passages come from early works in the Leibnizian corpus; the account I have given reflects what I consider to be his more mature view. Second, it strikes me that we find in these early texts a philosophical tension that Leibniz had perhaps not yet felt the force of or figured out how to resolve. Third, later passages that at first blush appear to confirm the earlier view are, I think, almost always based on interpretations that import the conceptual errors I have been pointing to throughout this paper.

Let us look briefly at the oft-cited discussion of moral motivation in *The Elements of Natural Law*. In this early work, Leibniz writes, “[T]here is no one who deliberately does anything except for the sake of his own good, for we seek the good also of those whom we love for the sake of the pleasure which we ourselves get from their happiness.”<sup>75</sup> This is, not surprisingly, the passage most likely to be cited as evidence that Leibniz is some kind of egoist. But we should not read this proposition so straightforwardly, for later in the very same text Leibniz argues that “the good of others” must itself be “sought for its own sake.”<sup>76</sup> It is clear that something remains to be explained here, for it simply cannot be true that morality demands that we do something for the sake of the pleasure we get from doing it and that we do it for its own sake. Either one values something intrinsically—for its own sake—or one values it instrumentally, for the sake of something else, such as its contribution to one’s personal welfare. Leibniz cannot have it both ways.

Leibniz himself seems to notice the trouble, and we find even in this early text the raw materials of his more mature position. For here too we find Leibniz arguing that the key to thinking about the virtue of justice is charity, and in his discussion of this, he comes to what is by now a familiar conclusion: we truly love those whose good delights and pleases us. He argues, “[S]ince justice . . . demands that we seek the good of others in itself, and since to seek the good of others in itself is to love them, it follows that love is the nature of justice.”<sup>77</sup> Leibniz is at pains to argue that the good of others cannot be sought merely as a means to some other good (viz. one’s own, or to pleasure as a further end apart from the love of the other). Rather, the good of others must always be sought as an end in itself, an end whose value is found contained within itself and is not from another source. This is what the pleasure of justice is for Leibniz, even early in his career. His defense of this becomes clearer in his later writings, where he explicitly argues that the fact that it is pleasant is a perception of its intrinsic value, not something that gives it a value it would otherwise lack. Though he does not explicitly argue for this position in this early work, he does introduce here the idea that justice is a pleasure of the mind, and that pleasure is something that comes from an act of judgment that has an irreducibly public character, rather than a pleasure that is private and based on one’s own subjective sensibilities.

Whatever we make of his earliest writings on justice and moral motivation, I have argued that his mature view is not egoist. In order to be an egoist, an agent must reject the good of others in favor of what he takes to be his own. Though

---

<sup>75</sup>L 208/A VI.462.

<sup>76</sup>L 212/A VI.468.

<sup>77</sup>L 214/A VI.472.

this is possible in Leibniz's theory, it is certainly not the ideal, nor would Leibniz take this to be a descriptive claim about how our minds inevitably operate. We rational creatures are inexorably driven to seek our own perfection (like all other substances), but in our case this turns out to be the perfection that can only come through virtue, which can only be attained precisely when we do not reject the good of others but seek it for its own sake. Although Leibniz does argue that virtue is intrinsically pleasing and does increase our perfection, these facts alone are insufficient to ground the charges of egoism so often made against him.<sup>78</sup>

#### BIBLIOGRAPHY AND ABBREVIATIONS

##### *Primary Texts*

- Descartes, René. *Oeuvres de Descartes*. Edited by C. Adam and P. Tannery. 12 vols. Paris: J. Vrin, 1996. [AT]  
 ———. *The Philosophical Writings of Descartes*. Translated by John Cottingham, Robert Stoothoff, Dugold Murdoch, and (for volume 3) Anthony Kenny. 3 vols. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984. [CSM]
- Leibniz, Gottfried Wilhelm. *Leibniz: Philosophical Papers and Letters*. 2nd ed. Translated by Leroy E. Loemker. Dordrecht: D. Reidel, 1969. [L]  
 ———. *Leibniz: Philosophical Writings*. Edited by G. H. R. Parkinson and translated by Mary Morris and G. H. R. Parkinson. London: J. M. Dent & Sons, 1973. [PW]  
 ———. *Leibniz: Sämtliche Schriften und Briefe*. 8 vols. Darmstadt and Berlin: Berlin Academy, 1923-. [A]  
 ———. *Die Philosophischen Schriften*. Edited by C. I. Gerhardt. 7 vols. Berlin: Weidman, 1875–90. Reprint, Hildesheim: Georg Olms, 1965. [G]  
 ———. *New Essays on Human Understanding*. Edited and translated by Peter Remnant and Jonathan Bennett. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996. [NE] Pagination is keyed to the page numbers in A 6.6.  
 ———. *Nouvelles lettres et opuscules inédits de Leibniz*. Edited by Louis Foucher de Careil. Paris: Auguste Durand, 1857. [F de C]  
 ———. *Opuscules et fragments inédits de Leibniz*. Edited by Louis Couturat. Paris: Félix Alcan, 1903. Reprint, Hildesheim: Georg Olms, 1966. [C]  
 ———. *Philosophical Essays*. Edited and translated by Roger Ariew and Daniel Garber. Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company, 1989. [AG]  
 ———. *The Political Writings of Leibniz*. Translated and edited by Patrick Riley. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1972. [R]  
 ———. *Rechtsphilosophisches aus Leibnizens ungedruckten Schriften*. Edited by Georg Mollat. Leipzig: Verlag Robolsky, 1885. [M]  
 ———. *Textes inédits d'après des manuscrits de la Bibliothèque provinciale d'Hanovre*. 2 vols. Edited by Gaston Grua. Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1948. [GR]  
 ———. *Theodicy*. Translated and edited by Austin Farrer and E. M. Huggard. La Salle: Open Court, 1985. [T]

##### *Secondary Sources*

- Brown, Gregory. "Disinterested Love: Understanding Leibniz's Reconciliation of Self- and Other-Regarding Motives." *British Journal for the History of Philosophy* 19 (2011): 265–303.  
 ———. "Leibniz's Moral Philosophy." In Jolley, *The Cambridge Companion to Leibniz*, 411–41.  
 Boyle, Matthew, and Lavin, Douglas. "Goodness and Desire." In *Desire, Practical Reason, and the Good*, edited by Sergio Tenenbaum, 161–201. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010.  
 Foot, Philippa. *Natural Goodness*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001.

<sup>78</sup>I would like to thank Mark Bullio, Chris Frey, Matt Kisner, and Nicholas Rescher for reading and commenting on early drafts of this paper, as well as audiences at the University of Pittsburgh and the University of Chicago for very helpful criticisms and suggestions. I am grateful to the John Templeton Foundation for the funding to work on this paper as part of the Virtue, Happiness, and Meaning of Life project.

- Goldenbaum, Ursula. "It's Love! Leibniz's Foundation of Natural Law as the Outcome of His Struggle with Hobbes' and Spinoza's Naturalism." In *The Philosophy of the Young Leibniz*, edited by Mark Kulstad, Morgans Laerke, and David Snyder, 189–201. Stuttgart: Franz Steiner Verlag, 2009.
- Hostler, John M. *Leibniz's Moral Philosophy*. London: Gerald Duckworth & Co., 1975.
- Jolley, Nicholas, ed. *The Cambridge Companion to Leibniz*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995.
- . *Leibniz*. New York: Routledge, 2005.
- Kulstad, Mark. "Leibniz, Animals, and Apperception." *Studia Leibnitiana* 13 (1981): 25–60.
- Loemker, Leroy E., ed. *Leibniz: Philosophical Papers and Letters*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1956.
- MacDonald, Scott. "Egoistic Rationalism: Aquinas's Basis for Christian Morality." In *Christian Theism and the Problems of Philosophy*, edited by Michael Beaty, 327–54. Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1990.
- Naert, Émilienne. *Leibniz et la Querelle du Pur Amour*. Paris: Librairie Philosophique J. Vrin, 1959.
- Nagel, Thomas. *The Possibility of Altruism*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1978.
- Riley, Patrick. *Leibniz' Universal Jurisprudence: Justice as the Charity of the Wise*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1996. [Riley]
- Rutherford, Donald. *Leibniz and the Rational Order of Nature*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995.
- Ryle, Gilbert. *The Concept of Mind*. 2nd edition. Chicago: Chicago University Press, 2000.
- Schneewind, Jerome B. *The Invention of Autonomy: A History of Modern Moral Philosophy*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998.
- Thompson, Michael. *Life and Action*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2008.
- Youpa, Andrew. "Leibniz's Ethics." *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Fall 2013 Edition). Edited by Edward N. Zalta. <http://plato.stanford.edu/archives/fall2013/entries/leibniz-ethics>.