

# Chapter 6

## Leibniz

### 6.1 Introduction



Figure 6.1: Leibniz

#### 6.1.1 Life and work

- Leibniz: 1646 - 1716 – Germany
- One of the last person who knew everything there was to know at his time in every domain of science and philosophy
- Discovered infinitesimal calculus independently of Newton
- Works:
  - *Theodicy* – the sole book he published during his lifetime

- *Discourse on Metaphysics* – written early in life
- *New Essays on Understanding* – answer to Locke’s *Essays on Understanding*
- *Monadology* – written late in life
- Important figure of the academic society of his time
- Also a diplomat and an historian during his lifetime

### 6.1.2 Leibniz’ philosophy – Basic Orientations

**Leibniz is a man of compromise** – Concerning philosophy, his main aims are:

1. To produce a philosophy which Descartes is reconciled with the scholastic tradition.
2. To develop a form of rationalism that answers the challenge of the empiricists (Locke)

**Leibniz is a man of religion** – Religion, and that idea that an all perfect God created the best world possible comes first.

Doctrines of metaphysics and epistemology should serve the purpose of explaining that this is true, despite the appearances of imperfections and evil in the world. In other words, the horizon of Leibniz’ metaphysics and epistemology is to produce a *theodicy*. (contrast this with the horizons of Descartes’ and Spinoza’ philosophies, i.e. the foundation of the new science, and the most happy life, respectively).

**Leibniz and the best possible world :**

Leibniz’ worldview is something along the following lines: The world as it exists is contingent. It could have been otherwise. That said, there is a sufficient reason which explains why everything is the way it is. Such a sufficient reason is understood by God. God surveyed all the possible worlds in their minute details. On the basis of his knowledge of the good, he chose to actualize the best possible world. This is the world in which we live.

—→ *If we take seriously the idea that God is omniscient, omnipotent and benevolent, then this world must be the best possible.*

## 6.2 Leibniz's Original Version of Rationalism

### 6.2.1 Readings and Study questions

- Readings:
  - *Monadology* 25-35 + 46
  - *New Essays*, Preface up to p. 376
- Study questions:
  1. What kind of thinking do humans share with animals? What kind of thinking and knowledge does distinguish humans from animals?
  2. What are the characteristics of “eternal truths” according to Leibniz?
  3. Explain the difference between truths of reasoning and truths of facts. How do they relate to the principle of contradiction and the principle of sufficient reason?

### 6.2.2 Perceptions, Memory, and Induction

Concerning how they gain knowledge, men behave like animals in three quarters of their actions, that is, every time they make inductions on the sole basis of perception and memory, two faculties we share with animals

- Animals have sense-perception just as we do. If anything, animals' senses are often more powerful tool than humans'.
- Memory is basically the same in both animals and humans.
- In both animals and humans: induction to a general rule from the memory of the conjunction of two perceptions (stick – pain)
- Hence, every time we behave on the sole basis of such rules, obtained by induction from empirical observation, we behave like animals.

—→ *This can be read as a charge against the empiricists, who maintain that we cannot do any better than the above: all knowledge originates in experience, and if experience does not lead us far, so be it.*

—→ *Leibniz is one of the only rationalists who developed a fully articulated criticism of the empiricist view: according to Leibniz, abstraction, induction and combination of ideas from our perceptions are not enough to give an account of all human cognitive abilities.*

### 6.2.3 Eternal and Necessary Truths (Humans Only)

Leibniz' main claim is that:

... the knowledge of eternal and necessary truths is what distinguishes us from simple animals ... ( *Monadology 29* )

What are these eternal truths? What kind of knowledge do we have of them? How do we gain such knowledge?

- Here is how Leibniz characterizes our knowledge of eternal and necessary truths
  - The knowledge of eternal truths gives us:
    - Reasons and the sciences
    - Reflexion and consciousness: awareness of our own existence
    - God
    - Common notions like being, substance etc.
  - The eternal and necessary truths are known by the mind
  - Paragraph 46: Eternal truths are not arbitrarily set by God (they are truly necessary) – Against Descartes.
  
- What are eternal and necessary truths then?
  - Known by the mind only, they are truth about abstract notions – a prime example is the principle of contradiction
  - They give us a superior kind of knowledge – *a priori knowledge* – without this kind of knowledge, we are no better than “beasts”

### 6.2.4 The Respective Roles of Reason and the Senses

Where does the knowledge of eternal truths come from? they are *innate*: implicit knowledge that can become actual under certain conditions:

- For Descartes, implicit knowledge can be actualized by using your reason with the proper method (forget about the needs and requests of your body, turn your full attention to your mind and what is in there). The senses do not play any significant role in the discovery of clear and distinct ideas
- For Leibniz, we may actualize our innate ideas through sense experience – senses might even be necessary in order to thought to occur. However, sense experience is not enough: it is just a trigger.

Leibniz has a beautiful metaphor to explain this: our mind is not a blank scale, nor is it a pre-made sculpture. Our mind is like a piece of marble, the veins of which correspond to our innate ideas (this is in the *New essays concerning human understanding* – an answer to Locke). The sculptor discovers and has to follow the veins of the marble when he works on a piece of art. The student also discovers and has the contours of his ideas when he works to gain knowledge.

—→ *Leibniz thus manages to develop a compromised view between empiricism and radical rationalism.*

### 6.2.5 Truths of Facts vs. Truths of Reasoning

#### Two Great Principles of Reasoning

- The principle of contradiction  
Is true whatever does not imply contradiction, and vice versa
- The principle of sufficient reason  
Nothing can exist and no statement can be true without having a sufficient reason to be so and not otherwise.

To these two principles of reasoning correspond two kinds of eternal truths: necessary and contingent.

### Two Kinds of Truths

Truths of Reasoning	Truths of Facts
= <i>Necessary</i> truths: their opposite implies contradiction.	= <i>Contingent</i> truths: their opposite is possible.
Analytic truths: their truths is reducible to simpler truths (tautologies) by a logical analysis	Non-Analytic truths: no proof possible by reduction to tautologies through logical analysis – Their truth depends on God's choice
Examples: 'All bachelors are non married'	Examples: 'Andrew is non married'
Truths of Mathematics	Truths of experience
Principle of Contradiction	Principle of Sufficient Reason

### Truth of Reasoning and their Necessary Truth

Truth of reasoning are reducible to tautologies through a logical analysis.

It is one of Leibniz dearest dream that we could invent a way to “compute” thoughts as we compute numbers. Note that he built the first computing machine.

This would be possible, according to him, if we could formulate properly our propositions, such that their structure appears clearly.

Then, by combining simple and complex truths, we could automatically produce new true propositions.

→ *What truths of reasoning are and how we find out about them is easily understood.*

### Truths of Facts and Their Sufficient Reason

There is, however, something puzzling about Leibniz's account about truths of facts. Indeed, he maintains both that

1. Contingency exists: there are some things or events in the world which are not necessary consequences of the rational order of the world – Contrast with Spinoza!

So, that Andrew is not married is not necessary, but contingent: it could have been otherwise.

2. All contingent truths must have a sufficient reason to be true

So, there is a sufficient reason for which Andrew is not married here and now: it is not a matter of arbitrary chance.

The point is simply this:

- That Andrew is not married is not necessary (it is not part of Andrew's definition)
- That Andrew is not married is indeed due to God's choice among various possibilities
- Such a choice is not arbitrary though: it is *the best choice* among all possible alternatives
- So: there is a sufficient reason why Andrew is not married, which is simply the reason why God chose it this way
- Of course, such a sufficient reason is unknown to us, and impossible to know by finite minds. We would have to be able to conceive of the infinity of alternatives (possible worlds) and see why the world in which Andrew is not married is the best one.

—→ *So, while it is not necessary that the world be the way it is, there is a sufficient reason for the world to be the way it is and not otherwise. Contingency exists, but not chance. Contingent truths are "the best" possible.*

### 6.2.6 Conclusion on Leibniz' Rationalism

Leibniz' version of rationalism has two original aspects:

1. He takes seriously the challenge of the empiricists and design a proper answer to it.
  - He does not deny that some of our knowledge comes from experience. Nor does he deny that sense perception may have something to do with us discovering necessary and eternal truths. It may well be the case that the way in which you learned about the truths of mathematics and the truths of logic is through your senses.
  - From this, however, it does not follow that mathematical and logical truths do not have a special status. Even if we may need the senses to

trigger our grasping of such truths, such truths remains independent of experience, necessary and eternal.

2. Concerning the rational order of the world, Leibniz differs from Spinoza in allowing for the existence of contingency. The world is in rational order but there are two kinds of rational order:
  1. The order of necessary and eternal truths – governed by the principle of contradiction
  2. The order of truths of facts – governed by the principle of sufficient reason

There is a reason for everything, but not everything is necessary.

## 6.3 Leibniz' Theodicy

### 6.3.1 Readings and Study Questions

- Readings:
  - *Monadology* 36-45
  - *Discourse on Metaphysics* 1-7
- Study questions:
  1. What are Leibniz' arguments for the existence of God? Compare with Descartes and Spinoza.
  2. How does the nature of God imply that we must not only accept but also be entirely satisfied by his Creation, according to Leibniz??
  3. How does Leibniz explain appearances of disorder and evil within God's most perfect creation?

### 6.3.2 God

#### Proofs of God's existence

1. Cosmological Argument 1: God as the necessary and sufficient cause of contingent effects (what actually exists)



Truths of facts are contingents, that is, non necessary. The infinite series of non-necessary causes and effect must find a first, necessary cause: God.

2. Cosmological Argument 2: God as the source of the essences / possibles / eternal truths.

- Essences = set of the possibilities
- Existences = set of the actual realities

Anything that is real is possible beforehand: every thing that exist, existed first in the realm of possibles. However, not every possible get realized. The set of possibles is far larger than the set of realities.

Now, the possibilities, even if not real in the usual sense, have some kind of reality. What Leibniz says is then that God is the necessary source of the reality of the possibilities.

God possess in his understanding the entire realm of possible essences.

This is a new version of the cosmological argument: the reality of the possibles (essences) must not be based on anything only possible, or we find a regression ad infinitum again. Only a being *whose essence implies its existence, or in other words, whose sole possibility implies its actuality* can be the base of the reality of possibles.

3. Ontological Argument: Leibniz provides a modal version of the ontological argument

1. An all perfect infinite being is such that its possibility implies its actuality (that is to say, 'if God is possible, then God is')
2. It is possible that an all perfect infinite being exists
3. Hence, God exists

→ *In short, if a necessary being is possible, then this being necessarily exist actually.*

The reason for such a modified ontological argument is that Leibniz had a worry concerning Descartes' ontological argument. Remember that Descartes argued that we have a clear and distinct idea of God, in which God's definition implies its very existence. Leibniz very early raised the objection against Descartes' argument that our idea of God could be incoherent. It so happens that we have ideas but do not realize

that they are problematic. It could be well the case for the idea of God. Leibniz is not convinced that our ideas are so transparent. So, if we want the ontological argument to work, we have to make sure that our idea of God is not incoherent.

In other words, before the ontological argument can be put into work, it must shown that God is possible, that is, that the idea of God does not imply contradiction.

Leibniz holds here that the ideas of perfect knowledge and perfect power are coherent. These constitute the idea of God.

### God's nature

Follows the derivation of the nature of God. God is:

- unique
- unlimited
- absolute and infinitely perfect
- contains the entire realm of possibles

In the *Theodicy*, par. 7, Leibniz develops his argument:

- because God must have been able to grasp the entire realm of possibles, he has understanding
- because God must have chosen which possible world was to be actual, he has will
- because God was able to actualize such a world, he has power
- because the entire realm of possibles is infinite, God's understanding, will and power are infinite
- because everything is connected together, we need to postulate only one God

→ *That God is all perfect is a crucial pillar of Leibniz' philosophy. From there comes the need of a theodicy: a defense of God's perfection in the view of the appearances of evil in the world.*

### 6.3.3 Theodicy

According to Leibniz, that we will in the best possible world derives from the analysis of God's nature, that is, from God's being all the perfections unified in one.

**That God is all perfect implies that he does everything perfectly, even morally**

- **Leibniz' starting point:** "God is an absolute perfect being"
- **Consequence:** If God possess perfect knowledge and perfect power, that is if he is both omniscient and omnipotent, then:

God acts in the most perfect manner – not only metaphysically but also morally

What does this mean?

- Is Leibniz claiming that God's action should conform our human (too human?) moral values? – this seems unacceptable
- Or does Leibniz refer to absolute moral values – which human's moral action as well God's should follow? – but then is he saying that there exists some truths which exists beyond the absolute power of God?

**Leibniz: God follows the truth and the good**

- **The opposite view:** God does not depend on what is good and what is true. He decides on all those things. He is not "limited" by morals and sciences.
- **Leibniz' Objections:**
  - we can discover the goodness and truth of the creation
  - the opposite view is dangerous because:
    1. it destroy the value of the creation (if any other creation would have been equally good)
    2. it makes God a tyrant ruling in arbitrariness instead of ruling according to the truth and the good

- **Enlightened Freedom:** What the later statement involves is that, like Descartes, Leibniz holds that we are more free when our will is enlightened
  1. We *always* act for some reason
  2. We act *truly freely* if we know the reasons why we act like we do
  3. Indifference is not true liberty, acting according to a enlightened decision is true freedom

- **Consequence 1: God's Freedom:**

1. God's freedom does not consists in his choosing arbitrarily the good and the truths
2. Instead, God is most free when deciding what to do on the basis of his perfect knowledge of moral truths
3. and hence, God has created the best possible creation

Here again, Leibniz holds that “the highest liberty [is] to act in perfection according to the sovereign reason”

- **Consequence 2: Eternal Truths and God**

Leibniz disagrees with Descartes, who maintained that nothing was preceding God: He created us, minds, bodies but also ideas and principles of logic and of morals. See also *Monadology*, 46

### Consequence: our love for God

If we take seriously all the above, then we must:

- praise and love God, that is, praise and love the Creation – that is, want what God wants, and not want what he does not want
- Hence, not only must we accept the Creation as it is, but we must also be *entirely satisfied by the Creation*

### Aspect of the Creation's perfection

What does it mean that the Creation is perfect? Here is Leibniz' main ideas on the world's perfection:

- Simplicity of the means and richness and variety of the effects
  - A world with a single beautiful being would be less perfect because less rich
  - Our world has the most perfect balance between richness and simplicity of the principles and laws.
- Order, order, everywhere – the most complex thing on earth is still part of a mathematical formula
- Even miracles conform to God's order

→ *Of course, Leibniz does not say that everything is wonderful in the world we live in. What he claims instead is that the world we live in is the most perfect possible world.*

#### 6.3.4 Conclusion on Leibniz and God

- Leibniz, like most of his contemporaries, tries to “prove” the existence of God. As Descartes and Spinoza, he uses variations on the cosmological and the ontological arguments. The originality of Leibniz' argument is their *modal character*:
  - For the cosmological arguments: God is the sources of all possibles (by contrast to the cause of what actually exists)
  - For the ontological argument: God, being without limits, is the only being whose mere possibility implies actuality.
- Unlike his contemporaries, Leibniz takes seriously and tries to answer the problem of evil. One of his important aims in developing a philosophy is to defend God's justice and benevolence. The idea is that we should take seriously the notion of God's being all perfect.

→ *We live in the best possible world.*

For a mockery of Leibniz' theodicy, see Voltaire, *Candide*