

# LEIBNIZ ON THE WEAKNESS OF WILL AND THE DOCTRINE OF DISTINCT INCLINATION

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There seems to be a tension between Leibniz's acceptance of the weakness of will in the *New Essays* and his claim that "the wise mind tends towards all good, as good, in proportion to his knowledge and his power" in the *Theodicy* (G6 285 = H 303). In the *New Essays*, Leibniz agrees with Locke in accepting the possibility of weakness of will. For Locke, one's will is often too weak to carry out what one judges to good. Likewise, Leibniz admits that desire is necessary for motivation since reason does not have a direct power to motivate an agent. Here Leibniz's view looks very close to contemporary forms of motive externalism.

However, Leibniz is also willing to argue that "the wise mind always acts according to principles" (G6 315 = H 331). He even suggests that a wise person acts "never according to exceptions" (G6 315 = H 331). This suggests that a human being, if he is wise enough, can always act by following the dictates of his reason. Such a strong claim can be possible only through accepting some kind of essential connection between the understanding of "principles" and the motivation in accordance with them.

Our task is to reconcile these two claims: that the will of human being may be so weak that it cannot follow a judgment, and that a wise human being is always motivated by his judgment. The first statement seems to suggest that motivation is not a matter of how we understand what we should do. In contrast, the second statement seems to suggest that motivation is simply a matter of having such understanding. In this paper I will explain the given claims consistently, and argue that for Leibniz, an agent is motivated by her thought if it is clear and distinct. This claim does not necessarily exclude the possibility of weakness of will. Thoughts are not always clear and distinct, and therefore they do not always motivate the agent.

To be sure, another strategy for reading Leibniz might seem possible. The *Theodicy* is often considered to be Leibniz's exoteric work for Christians, and thus some claims in it may be discounted as not representative of his real view.<sup>1</sup> For instance, Leibniz's suggestion that a good person may be happy in another life (in heaven) (G6

111 = H 135) seems to be inconsistent with his doctrine of the harmony of nature and grace, which implies that all rewards and punishments are given in the course of nature, not in heaven (G6 622 = M 88-9).<sup>2</sup> So, perhaps we should not take Leibniz's discussion of reward in the heaven seriously. One might be tempted to instead suppose that Leibniz does not propound the view that wise minds always act on principles. But this line of interpretation is hard to make, given that Leibniz does not have a specific reason to propose the view in the *Theodicy*. This claim about wise minds might be best associated with the tradition of ancient Greek philosophers, especially Socrates, Plato, and the Stoics, rather than with Christianity. It is hard to explain why Leibniz needs to stick to this claim in the *Theodicy*. In fact, most of the claims in this book are also found in other texts of his,<sup>3</sup> and generally it is reasonable to take a claim in the *Theodicy* as Leibniz's own.

It is also difficult to deny that Leibniz accepts the weakness of will, since Locke argues that wills are often weak, and Theophilus, an interlocutor who advocates Leibniz's own view in the *New Essays*, explicitly agrees with Locke on this topic. For Locke, a will is not often determined by rational decisions, but rather by some psychological state with causal power, called "uneasiness," which we cannot know or explain (Essay 2.21.31). Uneasiness accompanies with most of passions like aversion, fear, anger, envy and shame, and it forms our desire (Essay 2.21.39). Philalethes, another interlocutor in the *New Essays* who defends Locke, suggests the term "uneasiness" can be translated as the French word "inquiétude [disquiet]." In his view, when one has uneasiness, he is passively inclined to do something without knowing why (NE 2.20.6 = RB 164). Philalethes even argues that "the motive to change is always some 'disquiet'" (NE 2.21.29 = RB 183). Since motivation is constituted by instances of disquiet, which are not noticed nor understood, Philalethes claims that our motivation is not determined by what we understand to be good (NE 2.21.31 = RB 183-4).

Locke and Philalethes also deny an essential connection between understanding and motivation. An individual may completely understand that alcoholic beverages will seriously spoil his health, bring him into poverty, and earn the censure of others (NE 2.21.35 = RB 184-5). Nonetheless, his uneasiness or disquiet leads him to the tavern, compelled by a desire to be with his drinking his companions. Thus, his understanding fails to motivate him. Even if he has a thought about the good of refraining from drinking, this thought does not have power upon his mind and therefore he is not moved by the thought.

Now, Leibniz explicitly admits that one's will is not always strong enough to observe the command of reason. He recounts an episode of a man who is "eminent in both church and state" (NE 2.21.35 = RB 187). This man knew he should refrain from eating meat for his health, but he could not help eating it when he caught the smell of tasty meat. This example was enough for Leibniz to be convinced of the possibility of the weakness of will.

Leibniz argues that our thought does not have a direct power to motivate us to act. That is to say, thoughts always need desires or inclinations in order to form a motivation. For instance, Leibniz claims that the mind "must be able to oppose its desires only *indirectly*" (NE 2.21.48 = RB 197). Even if an agent judges that she should do something, she cannot be motivated accordingly without the mediation of a cooperat-

ing desire when she has an irrational desire not to do it. The reason of an agent always needs a cooperating desire to motivate her.

Considering Leibniz's view that reason alone cannot motivate an agent, Ezio Vailati argues that for Leibniz an agent is motivated by her perception of good if she is sensitive to the good (Vailati 219). Leibniz states that "the will pursues the greatest good, and flees the greatest evil, of which it is sensible" (NE 2.21.35 = RB 185). One of its implications is that an agent is not motivated by her thought if she is not sensitive to the good presented by her thought. To explain this implication, Vailati suggests that, for Leibniz, beliefs have two dimensions (Vailati 221). The first dimension is epistemological and constituted by the content of the agent's belief. The second dimension is psychological and constituted by the capacity of the belief to render us sensitive to it. By introducing this framework, Vailati tries to explain the weakness of will. According to Vailati's reading of Leibniz, an agent may have a thought about what she should do, a thought that is epistemologically adequate and of which all the contents are understood, and yet she may not be moved by this thought, because it is not *lively* enough. When a thought is not lively, the good presented by the thought may not be sensible for an agent, and thus she may not be motivated by the thought.

However, Vailati ignores how a clear and distinct thought can eventually move an agent in Leibniz's view. In other words, he seems to ignore how the epistemological dimension is enough to motivate. Vailati suggests that however adequate the epistemological dimension is, it is possible that an agent may remain unmotivated. Thus, even a clear and distinct thought about what an agent should do may fail to motivate her. But, Leibniz suggests that sentiments overcome thoughts since the images presented by these thoughts are so faint (NE 2.21.35 = RB 187). He also suggests that thoughts are presented clearly [*clairement*]<sup>4</sup> if "we could only apply ourselves to getting through to the senses of the words or symbols" (NE 2.21.35 = RB 186-7). So, it seems that when one makes efforts to get through the meanings or contents of the symbols, her thought will be clear and distinct and thus move her.

Let us look more closely at how Leibniz suggests that a clear and distinct thought will certainly motivate an agent. Leibniz suggests that a thought from reasoning is always tied to a distinct inclination, while bodily sensations are tied to confused inclinations (NE 2.21.41 = RB 194). Both distinct and confused inclinations are causally efficacious and have some influence upon our final decisions or complete volitions. So far, the discussion is completely compatible with an acceptance of the weakness of will. Even if an agent has distinct inclinations coming from reason, still they may not be strong enough to overcome diametrically opposed confused inclinations.

However, Leibniz does not think the agent is helpless in the face of confused inclinations; he discusses how one can overcome confused inclinations in order to be motivated in accordance with reason. Leibniz first diagnoses the cause of failing to be motivated through reason, stating that "the neglect of things that are truly good arises largely from the fact that, on topics and in circumstances where our senses are not much engaged, our thoughts are for the most part what we might call 'blind'" (NE 2.21.35 = RB 185). When our thoughts are blind, we merely take note of the symbols or words which represent them, and are not completely aware of the content. To be sure, if we recognize all the symbols or words that represent our thoughts, we under-

stand these symbols as representing different ideas, and we distinctly differentiate them. But, Leibniz points out that not all distinct thoughts are presented clearly.

Leibniz begins his discussion of how to make our thoughts clear as well as distinct with an analogy of algebra and geometry. When a mathematician uses algebra to figure out a solution for a geometrical problem, he seldom pays attention to a geometrical figure in the issue. But if he does, the content which is represented by algebraic symbols will be clear for him. In general, Leibniz suggests when a thought is not clear and distinct, it is not well-analyzed. The contents of the thought are given in the course of an analysis, so before the analysis there is no way to pay attention to the contents in detail. If our attention is not focused enough, thoughts are not presented clearly and do not move our minds. Leibniz admits that people are often too busy or lazy to pay enough attention to the content and meaning of symbols or words.

Thus, Leibniz suggests that one can fail to be motivated by a thought because the thought is blind and therefore not clear and distinct. This implies that if a thought is clear and distinct, and thus not blind, it is able to move the mind. Indeed, Leibniz suggests that the best way to safeguard oneself against strong passions is to proceed methodically and stick to “sequences of thought for which reason ... provides the thread” (NE 2.21.47 = RB 196). Thus, Leibniz seems to hold that a clear and distinct thought about what one should do will motivate her accordingly.

We need to see how Leibniz can justify the claim that having a clear and distinct thought is sufficient for motivation. In the framework of Leibniz’s metaphysics in the late period, strictly speaking only simple and immaterial substances (or monads) exist, and they only have perceptions and appetitions (G2 270 = L 537). All monads or simple substances are immaterial and their properties are considered to be mental rather than physical. Human minds are among the simple substances and they have both distinct and confused perceptions (M 16, 29 = G6 609, 611). When we have clear and distinct judgments about what we should do, we have distinct perceptions, whereas we have confused perceptions when we desire something without understanding why it is good for us. Distinct and confused perceptions are tied to distinct and confused appetitions or inclinations.<sup>5</sup> All appetitions or inclinations are explained teleologically—they are considered as tendencies toward goods presented by perceptions.

Also, we need to take note of Leibniz’s doctrine of sufficient reason, which implies that whenever we make a decision, there needs to be some reason guiding our choice.<sup>6</sup> For Leibniz, will does not have a capacity to choose something purely arbitrary. Even if we have decided something without any reasonable explanation, there is a reason to determine our complete volition. His doctrine of small or unconscious perception plays a huge role here. Even when we are not aware of the reason for our choice, we at least have small or unconscious perceptions of some goods. Whenever we make a choice, we have perceived some good, whether consciously or unconsciously, in the option we have chosen.

The discussion above, however, is still not sufficient to establish that an inclination coming from a clear and distinct thought is strong enough to overcome confused inclinations. It merely shows that a clear and distinct thought brings about some inclination, while a sensation brings about another inclination. Perhaps Leibniz does not give a complete answer for this question, but we can find some passages to support the

view that a clear and distinct thought coming from reason is tied to a strong inclination to motivate the mind. First, Leibniz suggests that a man perceiving some good is also filled with some “disquiet,” which will drive him to pursue the good. It seems that even a wise mind is moved by disquiet, because he knows that he is trying to achieve something that he presently lacks (NE 2.21.36 = RB 189). The wise mind, aware of this lack, is eager to obtain what will fill the lack. The feeling of incompleteness drives her strongly, to the degree that she almost forgets about other, usually motivating desires. For Leibniz, even a wise mind is by nature very different from God, and it can never achieve a completely perfect state. For this reason, she is always in the process of achieving something good to make the state of affairs better. In this case, a feeling of lacking something has an utterly positive meaning.

Second, Leibniz suggests that reason brings to the forefront of the mind not only the image of good that will result from a reasonable action, but also the image of evil that will come if we do not follow the command of reason (NE 2.21.36 = RB 189). This image of evil will make an agent refrain from being motivated by inclinations coming from sensation. For these reasons, we ought to see Leibniz as making an essential connection between clear and distinct thoughts and motivations.

In sum, we should agree with Vailati’s interpretation that Leibniz is a “moderate internalist,” who introduces some essential connection between judgment and motivation, and who requires a desire or inclination for motivation at the same time. But, as I have claimed, Vailati misinterprets Leibniz when he insists that an epistemic dimension of perception of good is not sufficient for motivation. Leibniz’s discussion of distinct inclination shows not only that some inclination always comes from a clear and distinct thought about what one should do, but further that the given inclination is sufficient for motivation. *Prima facie*, Leibniz’s requirement of desire for motivation may look a bare acceptance of the weakness of will, and eventually the weakness of reason itself. But in fact, first, by introducing an essential connection between thought and inclination, Leibniz guarantees reason at least has some influence upon motivation through the distinct inclination coming from it. Furthermore, Leibniz suggests that a clear and distinct thought is indicative of deep care for the content at hand, and motivates the mind.

## NOTES

1. Robert Adams interestingly discusses Leibniz’s attitude towards one of his most popular works, the *Theodicy*. Adams introduces a letter to Christopher Matthäus Pfaff, in which Leibniz states that this book is “not for philosophers” (Adams 50-2).

2. Laurence Carlin has an intensive discussion of the last sections of the *Monadology*, and he argues that according to Leibniz the world will generate punishments or rewards in accordance with vicious or virtuous acts (M 88-9; Carlin 139-46).

3. Adams admits that if we read the *Theodicy* carefully, we can find claims to support determinism, which can also be found in other works (Adams 21-22, 34-36).

4. Peter Remnant and Jonathan Bennett translated the term “*clairement*” as “vividly,” but naturally it also can be translated “clearly.”

5. Leibniz uses the expression “inclinations or appetitions” (G4 550), which suggests that “inclination” and “appetition” are synonyms.

6. Leibniz states that even a free agent does not act in an undetermined way. The supposition

of an undetermined free agent destroys “the fundamental axiom that *nothing happens without reason*” (NE 2.21.13 = RB 179). So for him, any decision is determined by the previous tendency of the mind.

#### ABBREVIATIONS

- Essay:** *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding*, cited by book, chapter and section.  
**G:** *Die philosophischen Schriften von Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz*, 7 vols., ed. C. I. Gerhardt (Berlin: Weidmann, 1875–90), cited by volume and page.  
**H:** *Theodicy*. Trans. by E.M. Huggard (BiblioBazaar, 2007)  
**L:** *Leibniz: Philosophical Papers and Letters* (Leidel, 1969)  
**NE:** *Nouveaux Essais*, cited by book, chapter and section.  
**M:** *Monadology*, cited by section.  
**RB:** *New Essays on Human Understanding*. Trans. and Ed. by Peter Remnant and Jonathan Bennett (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1996)

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