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Understanding Leibniz: In Favor of Jaspers' Interpretation of Leibnizian Metaphysics over Russell's Appraisal

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Abstract

Amongst modern readings of Leibniz's *Principles of Nature and Grace, Based on Reason*, there exists two which can serve as fuel for insightful debate. According to one of these commentators, Bertrand Russell, the conclusions found in Leibniz's *Principles* depend on analytic maxims, such as the principle of sufficient reason, as well as the law of contradiction. To Russell, the certitude of Leibniz's methodological axioms was questionable, and by casting light on their logical shortcomings, he believed he severely damaged the so-called truths stated in the *Principles*. However, even if Leibniz's reasoning was not infallible, and Russell correct, could another interpretation of the *Principles*, assists in showing alternative values discoverable in this central Leibnizian text? First, this essay will briefly summarize Leibniz's *Principles of Nature and Grace, Based on Reason*, while engaging the reader to focus on some central issues which paved the way for Russell's critical treatment of Leibnizian metaphysics in *A History of Western Philosophy*. Lastly, this article will close with support for another account of the *Principles*, by Jaspers, instead of Russell's, for Jaspers' treatment of the *Principles* is fairer to the spirit of the Leibnizian project than Russell's critique of it.

Keywords: Leibniz, Russell, Jaspers, Metaphysics.

Leibniz's Principles of Nature and Grace, Based on Reason

Leibniz begins his *Principles of Nature and Grace, Based on Reason* by discussing the meaning and nature of the term substance. By substance, Leibniz understands that which holds the potential to act (207), and he continues to divide this ontological category into two classes; those existing as simple, and those appearing as a composite. To Leibniz simple substances are those entities which are unities, wholes, or ones (207).

On the other hand, there exist composite substances which are the phenomena of simple substances ordered and acting in concert (Leibniz 207-208, 211-212). Unsurprisingly, Leibniz adheres to the view that no composite substance could appear without simple substances working in unison (207-208, 211-212). That is, just like table salt, or the chemical bond between *Na* and *Cl* would only be chlorine, or *Cl*, without its sodium, or *Na*, counterpart, Leibniz believes composite substances appear to be what they are due to their particles, or simple substances, behaving in agreement (207-208, 211-212).

Now, on Russell's reading of Leibniz's treatment of substance, he finds that Leibniz's *Principles* display a type of formalism in which the grander the subject term of a substance, the more predicates can fall under its conceptual umbrella (Russell 591-592). As such, Russell understands Leibniz's concept of substance as ultimately leading back to the most magnificent of substances, God, or that conceptual entity who is attributable as containing all predicates aside from those which contradict the nature, or essence, or meaning of the Divine when understood by reason (Russell 591-592).

However, as Russell (591-592) points out, one main problem with Leibniz's rationale in the Principles is that it fails to adequately capture how it is that a substance, including God, could contain predicates that are genuinely definable and potentially applicable to it. While, at the same time, not being what one commonly conceives as constituting that substance's essence (*Russell* 592-593). In other words, Russell believes that Leibniz's logic in the

Principles errs in its attempt to justify how it is that a substance, especially a supernatural, or transcendently perfect one like God, could contain all predicates despite the reality of those terms used for describing the nefarious dimensions of life (592-593).

Next, Leibniz continues his *Principles of Nature and Grace, Based on Reason* by detailing how the elementary parts constituting the body agree in their actions, without directly interacting. First, Leibniz asserts that the body does not possess extension, and rather it is a phenomenon, or an appearance of a plethora of simple substances arranged in a manner which represents the soul, or the essential substance constituting the core of an entity, to match its self-understanding (207-209). As such, Leibniz goes on to explain why it is that simple particles complement each other, flawlessly.

To Leibniz, the simple substances acting in concert to produce the image of a composite substance are in synch due to the law of efficient causes. By efficient causation, Leibniz ultimately believes that God pre-ordained the universe to be harmonious, for God's perfection saw that it would be best to choose and create a world displaying order, to maintain life, rather than leaving existence to hang on a whim completely. Hence, God, as the creator, or orchestrator of existence, in the end, sustains the harmoniousness of the simple substances shaping the appearances of bodies, due to him/her initially designing life to be orderly (Leibniz 208, 211-212).

To re-enter Russell's perspective (583-585), this Leibnizian account of the body is faulty, for it does not indubitably capture how it could be that particles are independent of one another, or unable to mesh, while also always being unfailingly in synchronization. To Russell, this problem, derives, in part, from Leibniz's invoking of the principle of sufficient reason, which states that everything that is an effect must have a cause. However, Russell demonstrates why it is that Leibniz's main causal substance, God, exists problematically, for even Leibniz asserts that God transcends and thus exists detached from the universe (583-

585). Consequently, if God were supernatural, how could it be that he/she ordained the natural order to be harmonious, when he/she, as its cause, is unlike the effect that he/she supposedly crafted (Russell 582-589).

Also, Leibniz draws attention to what he calls the soul, or mind, as well as the laws which it operates according to, and how those laws can gel, or match with the physical laws of efficient causation. First, Leibniz believes that the laws which govern the mind function according to final causes (208). That is, the mind or soul's, intellectual, or active powers possess the ability to set goals and fulfill its ends by using its own will, or volition (Leibniz 208). As such Leibniz asserts that to explain how the mind and body impeccably pair but never intermingle, he reapplies his theory of pre-established harmony, and claims that the body's motion mimics the will's desire, which is an output of the mind. In other words, God's crafting of the conditions which enabled life to emerge led to the synchronized nature of the mind and body (*Principles* Leibniz 208). Simultaneously, Leibniz also wants his readers to understand that the final causes, which the mind fixes for itself, become concrete when the body acts, or that instant in which the body's behavior seamlessly aligns with the mind's prerogatives (208).

Under Russell's scope, one quagmire with Leibniz's account of God's pre-decreed laws which led to the synchronized condition of the mind and body becomes apparent when one inspects the implications of Leibniz's treatment of the mind and body as different kinds of substances (584-590). As stated above, Leibniz asserted that a substance is that which could act. He also declared that a substance is either simple or composite. He then continued to inform his readers that the body is a composite whereas the soul is a simple unity (Leibniz 207-208). However, how could it be that a pure unity, such as the mind, mimics the harmonious relations between the various particles, constituting the appearance of the body, without dispersing into a multitude of atoms itself (Russell 584-590)? One may equally ask

how it could be that many particles always parallel the nature of the soul's pure unity when those elementary substances cannot decide otherwise, for they lack the soul's actual capability of willing (Russell 584-590). Lastly, these problems, as well as the issues tied to Leibniz's understanding and use of the principle of sufficient reason and the law of contradiction, as found in his *Principles*, seem to undercut the value of the Leibnizian system; however, there remain other readings of Leibniz, including that of Karl Jaspers.

Jaspers' Interpretation of the Leibnizian Project Over Russell's Account

Like Russell, the philosopher Karl Jaspers (172-177) also adheres to the view that there existed significant analytic issues resulting from Leibniz's conclusions concerning the nature of substances, as well as God's pre-ordained harmonious universe. However, Jaspers (172-177) takes his time to detail Leibniz's accomplishments as well as the positive findings issuing from Leibniz's metaphysical schema. Some of these positive metaphysical assertions include Leibniz's understanding of the natural order as being an active and continually dynamic substance (Jaspers 172-174). As Jaspers (172-174) himself points out, even Leibniz hints to an understanding of the cosmos as a lively entity, endlessly developing, when he states in his Principles of Nature and Grace, Based on Reason, that the universe will change, but is, and always will be indestructible.

To Jaspers (172-178), Leibniz's statement concerning how Nature can metamorphize, but never cease to exist, hides an immensely influential discovery, for if the universe is imperishable, then one may understand it as infinite. This buried concept of infinity, Jaspers (172-173) asserts, plays a significant role in the Leibnizian corpus, including in Leibniz's Principles, where one finds the implications of the infinite, or God, as fashioning a universe in which one's common understanding of time and space are erroneous.

In other words, Leibniz's belief in an infinite universe serves as a theoretical foundation to make a positive claim about time and space, mainly that each is endless, and that attempts to measure either always fail metaphysically (Jaspers 172-173). First, Leibniz (207-209) adheres to the view that space cannot be empty since the particles patterning simple substances are divisible to no end. He also cast light on the fact that simple substances, as genuine wholes, or ones, are not subject to division, and as such space can never be empty, for it will always continue to hold something (Leibniz 207-209).

From Jaspers' (172-174) perspective, this also reveals Leibniz as implying that the senses, or perception exists limitedly because only rational analysis can show that no substance depreciates to non-existence. This Leibnizian position, Jaspers (172-174) believes, provides evidence for accepting that Leibniz stumbled on a very modern idea, namely that there exist realities which fail to appear to the naked eye, while nevertheless still being genuinely a part of existence.

Moreover, Leibniz's treatment of time may also help to uncover another positive element in his philosophy. Now, to Leibniz (207-209), time is illusory for it is the measure of motion in the universe and not the measure of its creator, God's activity. Consequently, Leibniz (207-209) states that time exists as a human fact, and not an eternal truth, for it is not the case that people could perceive the motions of God's eternal activity as they do the movements of other creatures, who are subject to quantification. That is, time, as a human invention is not truly certain, and as such, Leibniz (207-209) believes it exists solely due to individuals registering the movements of objects and lifeforms in a way that all could relate or agree upon as being the same phenomena. Hence, without the ability to perceive the unfolding of the existence of others like themselves, Leibniz (207-209) would believe that people would be unable to register the changes in the different appearances around them. Lastly, without their perceptive capacities to intake the ephemeral phenomenal world,

Leibniz (207-209) would assert that people would be unable to construct an idea like time, for they cannot recognize it purely by reason; leaving it unable to be eternally irrefutable.

As understood by Jaspers (172-179), Leibniz's treatment of time helped to raise the problem of how something like God, whom people understand as being everlasting, or infinite, could give way to the development of a world and species, like people, who could record and refer to what they believe is temporal. To Jaspers (172-179), though Leibniz never successfully resolves this issue, it is still valuable to assess the problem of time, for if Leibniz is correct, and time contingent, then a significant practice performed by people lacks genuine reality. That is if Leibniz is right and time is purely a matter of fact, only existing in the earthly realm, then when individuals measure time, they are, in fact, engaging in a habit deriving from custom, and not from the recognition of a universal truth uncoverable by all humanity (Jaspers 172-179).

Now, the differences between Russell's and Jaspers' treatment of Leibniz's ideas, like those found in the *Principles of Nature and Grace, Based on Reason*, affect the way in which their readers come to comprehend the spirit of this Leibnizian work. One way in which Russell and Jaspers differ in their analysis of Leibniz is that Russell takes on the role of being an interlocutor, critiquing and challenging Leibniz's metaphysical findings, whereas Jaspers (172-179) focus is on the value of the problems Leibniz, though ill-fatedly, attempted to resolve. These Leibnizian problems, including how it is that God exists apart from the universe, while nevertheless being its life-giving source, or even how it could be that the Deity is entirely optimistic, helped to treat central problems in Early-Modern Rationalism in a more crystallized and honed way (Jaspers 172-179). Thus, instead of trying to thwart Leibniz's philosophical undertaking, as does Russell, Jaspers (180-184), in good faith, assists his readers in understanding Leibniz as a thinker, who though far from flawless, helped to give rise to modern investigations appearing in present-day discourse. That is, ideas such as

panpsychism, or the belief that all organic life possesses capacities to intake and react to the phenomenal appearances radiated by an array of monadic substances, still conjure academic curiosity; such as CUNY astronomer Greg Matloff's (147) research into the possibility of planetary objects displaying signs of "consciousness."

Another valuable Leibnizian contribution to philosophy, which Russell seems to doubt, and understate is Leibniz's (207-213) treatment of God as transcendent, or existing in a way that is over and above creation. To Jaspers (172-178, 180-184) this Leibnizian hypothesis was not the first instance of the idea of transcendence in Western philosophical thought; however, it may be the initial consideration of such a notion blatantly stated by an Early-Modern thinker. As such, one may claim that through Jaspers' (172-178, 180-184) lens, Leibniz's metaphysical conclusions opened the field for the beginning of considering the nature of possible realities outside of the worldly realm. Jaspers (172-178, 180-184) continues to claim that Leibniz's speculations also assisted in providing a basis for the analysis of ideas concerning consciousness and unconsciousness, unlike Russell's fixation on the logical errs of Leibnizian philosophy. Finally, Jaspers, by detailing these positive speculative findings in the Leibnizian corpus gives his readers a fairer interpretation of this major figure in Western thought, unlike Russell, who finds little value in Leibniz's theoretical conclusions, since they spring from their author's mistaken analysis (Russell 587-593).

Conclusion

This presentation began by briefly unpacking Leibniz's philosophy as stated in his *Principles of Nature and Grace, Based on Reason*, while at the same time drawing the reader to consider significant challenges to the Leibnizian project through the critical lens of Bertrand Russell. Afterward, this article provided the reader with a concise synopsis of Karl Jaspers' take on Leibnizian metaphysics, to set the stage to demonstrate why it is that his

appraisal of Leibniz is more in tune with the overall project discussed in the *Principles* than Russell's analysis.

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