

Not So Innocent:

An *Akratic* Reading of Leibnizian “Judgment”

Oda Storbråten Davanger

Abstract: Leibniz seeks to establish the tenability of faith and reason in his moral philosophy through a tripod of thought, consisting of 1) fundamental human goodness; 2) human error in judgment; and 3) that God is just. A difficulty arises concerning how God can justly punish human beings if they always will what is Good. By considering *akrasia*, which occurs when error is committed despite its clear nonconformity with the Good, and examining the Leibnizian concept of “judgment,” Leibniz’s tripod can be upheld.

*When God makes a choice, it is through his knowledge of the best; when man does so, he will choose the alternative that seems to be best.*¹

—G. W. Leibniz, 1707 letter to Coste

Introduction

To give an account of a perceived difficulty in Leibniz’s moral philosophy, I have identified a tripod of thought. The tripod consists of three pillars that hold up Leibniz’s ethics, which may topple if one of these pillars is shown to be untenable with the others. The pillars of the tripod, in simple terms, consist of 1) Leibniz’s belief in the fundamental goodness of humanity, or rather, his belief that humans always will what is Good; 2) the notion that human beings make judgmental errors because of their limited knowledge, which may lead people to unknowingly commit error;² and finally, 3) the idea that God is Good and therefore just in his administration of punishment for error. For Leibniz, the use of reason and knowledge combined with faith in the Good God leads to the practice of morality—an ethical navigation between the known and unknown.

Sometimes what we judge to be the best choice based on our limited knowledge of things does not, in reality, conform to the Good. The issue at stake is how Leibniz can hold human beings morally accountable to God’s just punishments if he simultaneously posits that human beings always will what is Good and mistakenly err. Because the human will always wills what is Good, it cannot be accountable for error it did not intend. This difficulty becomes apparent as we consider how unjust it would be for God to punish people for their wrongdoings if they thought they were doing something Good. As such, Leibniz’s position only succeeds if the one who is punished knows why, namely, that he or she is guilty of committing error.

In the first section, I give an account of what I have identified as Leibniz’s moral tripod and explain how its philosophical tenability relies on

¹ John Hostler, *Leibniz’s Moral Philosophy* (London: Duckworth, 1975), 31.

² Leibniz often refers to errors as “evil.”



accountability. Next, I find that there is a divide between Leibniz scholars regarding their understanding of how human beings commit error, whether error is due to the presence of mistakes or passions in judgment. Neither tradition, however, explores the relation between *akrasia*, viz., committing error knowingly, and accountability in Leibniz's concept of judgment. Third, I give an account of Leibniz's struggle with the tenability of reason and faith, and that, while the will is bound to what is Good, judgment may have the capacity to steer volitions in accord with the passions. I conclude that more research should be done to incorporate Leibniz's psychological elements into how scholars understand his moral philosophy, which would provide for a more tenable tripod.

The Tripod

In order to maintain some of his fundamental presumptions—that God exists and is Good, and that reason is tenable—Leibniz must somehow acknowledge that guilt is inherent to humankind. Frankel identifies Leibniz's tripod as an attempt to preserve “human freedom, divine freedom, and contingency,” and seeks to combine faith and reason:

He must preserve *human freedom* firstly because ‘it is in freedom that we seek the reason for praise and blame’, and secondly, so that we, rather than God, may be held morally responsible for our sins. He must preserve *divine freedom* in order to preserve God's moral perfection, which requires it to choose freely to do what it knows . . . to be the best.³

In other words, free acts must be subject to the agent's control rather than being accidental or constrained.⁴ In order to protect the validity of God's moral perfection and the justness of His punishments (and rewards), human beings must be accountable for error. As such, reason is at stake as it applies to the freedom of humanity while divinity is also at stake insofar as the justness, namely, the Goodness of God is questioned. According to the first pillar of the Leibnizian tripod, the human will is a divine inheritance and thus humans, like God, always will what is Good.⁵ Human beings have inherited the ability to use knowledge and reason to direct their wills toward the Good, but have inherited these perfections only limitedly.⁶ The more they act in accordance with knowledge and “right reason,”⁷ the more

³ Lois Frankel, “Being Able to do Otherwise: Leibniz on Freedom and Contingency,” in *Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz: Critical Assessments*, ed. R. S. Woolhouse (New York: Routledge, 1994), 284.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 285.

⁵ Bertrand Russell, *A Critical Exposition of the Philosophy of Leibniz* (London: Alden Press, 1975), 191.

⁶ G. W. Leibniz, “Discourse on Metaphysics,” in *Discourse on Metaphysics and Other Essays*, ed. Daniel Garber and Roger Ariew (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1991), §1.

⁷ G. W. Leibniz, “Letter to Magnus Wedderkopf, May 1671,” in *Philosophical Papers and Letters: A Selection*, ed. and trans. Leroy Loemker (Chicago: Chicago UP, 1956), 227.

free are human beings, for it is then that they allow their wills to contribute to the manifestation of what is Good.⁸

A person who knows through reason what is Good but chooses to act according to apparent goods and passions rather than the actual Good is *akratic*. *Akrasia* is a term used to describe a situation where “an agent fails to adopt in practice what he sincerely judges to be the best course of action.”⁹ For example, someone may choose to smoke cigarettes while pregnant, despite knowing that this act is wrong, viz. an error. In contrast to the Aristotelian understanding of *akrasia*—that the *akratic* person is overcome by desire—Leibniz believes that the *akratic* person actively chooses the less good action “in accord with reasons, albeit ones that would not generally be regarded as valid.”¹⁰ The smoking pregnant woman, for example, may reason that her smoking habits are beneficial to the pregnancy because quitting would create horrible levels of stress, although she very well knows that this reason is not valid. The question pertaining to the Leibnizian tripod is how to account for *akrasia* if human beings always will what is Good. Examining the Leibnizian concept of judgment can illuminate how *akrasia* and human goodness can coexist without contradiction.

According to Leibniz, judgment plays a special role in volition. For Leibniz, volition is distinct from the will. The two elements of Leibnizian volition are *conatus*, translated as “striving, essence, or desire,” and *opinio*, namely judgment.¹¹ In other words, 1) human beings will the Good, and 2) in order to conclude in a judgment they must deliberate by reasoning about what the Good is in any given situation. Leibniz held that the human will cannot alone initiate volition, which also relies on judgment.¹² For Leibniz, *conatus* is a striving that follows *opinio*, which is responsible for identifying the Good.¹³ As such, volition is the product of the relation between willing and judging. How one understands the concept of judgment is important to one’s reading of the second pillar of the Leibnizian tripod, because it influences accountability and dictates whether or not error is strictly committed unknowingly.

For Leibniz’s tripod to be tenable there must be some accountability that renders human beings responsible for their actions. I claim that such accountability is located not in the will, but in the thinking of volition, namely judgment. Leibniz’s concept of judgment may preserve human goodness while it also accounts for the error that is derived from the misuse of reason. Perhaps this misuse, or rather, the “improper use of ideas [that] gives rise to several

⁸ Leibniz is drawing from Augustine’s “The Free Choice of the Will,” which posits that freedom is not achieved by being free of a master, but in following the right master. The right master is reason and knowledge, not passion. *The Fathers of the Church*, vol. 59, trans. Robert P. Russell (Washington: Catholic University of America Press, 1968), 146.

⁹ Hostler, 31.

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ Ibid., 18-9.

¹² Ibid., 19.

¹³ Ibid., 18.



errors," is a self-deception that provides the legitimacy needed for the will to regard an apparent good as Good.¹⁴

Innocence and Accountability

I find that many differences in scholars' interpretations of Leibniz's moral philosophy can be attributed to the lack of focus on Leibniz's concept of judgment. I posit that the philosophical tenability of the Leibnizian tripod is threatened by the role of accountability, or lack thereof, set forth by the innocence tradition. In contrast, the passion tradition claims that it is possible to commit error while also having clear knowledge about what is Good.

Of the innocence tradition, Maitra interprets Leibniz's philosophy in such a way that error can only be committed unknowingly, and thus not *akratically*.¹⁵ Maitra's reading finds that judgment can be false while still being representational of perceptions, which are always true. A false judgment is an error in which the "mistake is to believe (i.e., to judge as true) that which is false," namely, to believe an incorrect interpretation or inference.¹⁶ Maitra explains that the representation of perceptions might not be clear or distinct, but that the intellect will try to comprehend these confused and incomplete perceptions.¹⁷ The error of judgment then occurs in the privation of completeness, where one's limited understanding modifies confused and incomplete perceptions to find meaning.¹⁸ What one immediately perceives is a truth, although the intellect may mistake this truth for a falsity. The intellect may mistake an actual Good for an apparent good and vice versa, which would lead to committing an unknowing error.

Through her interpretation of Leibniz, Maitra claims that he succeeds in maintaining the Goodness of God because perceptions, all of which are received from God, are true even though these perceptions may be misunderstood to be something they are not. Her use of human "error," however, is confusing as it is unclear whether it refers to what is morally wrong or just factually incorrect. Maitra makes no effort to consider *akrasia* in her work and finds that human error is the result of limited judgment leading to faulty understanding. By disregarding the possibility of *akrasia*, her interpretation of Leibniz's ethics finds the first pillar, the goodness of human beings, to mean that human beings are solely Good. As such, it would seem that human beings are morally responsible for acting according to factual misunderstandings. This regard for human innocence must inevitably lead to the conclusion that divine punishment is unjust, which threatens the third pillar of the tripod, God's Goodness.

Murray, unlike Maitra, finds a place for *akrasia* within Leibniz's moral philosophy. Murray, of the passion tradition, claims that Leibniz's philosophy

¹⁴ Leibniz, "Discourse," §23.

¹⁵ Keya Maitra, "Leibniz's Account of Error," *International Journal of Philosophical Studies* 10, no. 1 (2002).

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 63.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 65.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*

is consistent with the discipline of psychology in viewing the intellect as a deliberating faculty that chooses between courses of action.¹⁹ When deliberation arrives at a judgment, the will follows an action that judgment has reasoned to be Good.²⁰ According to Murray's research, the psychological tradition finds that those courses of action judged to be Good could only incline, but not necessitate choice.²¹ Murray asserts that this lack of necessitation is a symptom of *akrasia*.²² He claims that passions are "appetitions resulting from unconscious or confused perceptions or apprehensions," such that *akrasia* occurs when unconscious drives influence volition.²³ In opposition to Maitra, Murray not only understands confused perceptions as passions, but employs *akrasia* to argue that "passions affect choice by changing the premises that the intellect employs in deducing the last practical judgment."²⁴ In a sense, Murray's understanding of the Leibnizian system involves possibilities of adjusting the playing field of deliberation in the interest of the passions. Thus, Murray finds that the agent does not realize what perceptions it is subject to during the deliberative process. Although he clearly understands the concept of judgment to involve complicated and unconscious factors, it is still not evident that Murray believes human beings may choose to commit error despite knowing the act in question is an error.

Unfortunately, despite Murray's recognition of the need for accountability in Leibniz's moral philosophy, Leibniz employed a different understanding of *akrasia* than Murray. The concept *akrasia* traditionally refers to the incontinent person who lacks self-restraint and control.²⁵ Murray is employing the traditional, Aristotelian notion of *akrasia*, and not the Leibnizian one by which human beings know better, but freely choose the apparent good over the real Good. According to Leibniz:

It is a daily occurrence for men to act against what they know; they conceal it from themselves by turning their thoughts aside, so as to follow their passions. Otherwise we would not find people eating and drinking what they know will make them ill or even kill them.²⁶

It is evident from this quote that Leibniz not only concerned himself with the problem of *akrasia*, but might have also conceived of a psychological

¹⁹ Although Murray does consider some disparities within the psychology tradition, on this point he claims there is a general agreement among the consulted psychology faculty.

²⁰ Michael J. Murray, "Spontaneity and Freedom in Leibniz," in *Leibniz: Nature and Freedom*, eds. Donald Rutherford and J. A. Cover (New York: Oxford University Press), 114.

²¹ *Ibid.*

²² *Ibid.*, 115.

²³ *Ibid.*

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 118.

²⁵ Henry George Liddell and Robert Scott, *A Greek-English Lexicon* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1968), 54.

²⁶ G. W. Leibniz, *New Essays on Human Understanding*, eds. and trans. Peter Remnant and Jonathan Bennett (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), lxxxv.



maneuver of self-concealment of some of one's own mental processes. Under Leibnizian *akrasia* the person committing error is acting according to reason, renders what is chosen freely chosen. Even though the person might "not do so for the right reason," and thus not achieve the highest level of freedom from passions, he or she did make a choice based on reason. Thus the choice was made freely, and the person is therefore accountable.²⁷ It is not the passions that overtake the intellect, but rather, *akrasia* is when judgment misuses reason to self-manipulate the conception of what is Good so that the passions appear Good. I posit that those who often commit *akratic* acts are artisans of making their desires seem reasonable. Those who often employ *akrasia* as a way of defending their actions to themselves misuse reason in such a manner that allows them to will otherwise than the Good. This strategy leads the will to some misrepresented construction of goodness instead of the actual Good. *Akrasia*, then, is the manipulative misuse of reason against better judgment that allows for a final product, a volition, which chooses an apparent good.

The significance of acknowledging *akrasia* in Leibniz's philosophy is that it renders just any divine judgment on human behavior. This accountability of *akrasia* reconciles the third and second pillar of the Leibnizian tripod, that is, that God is just and human beings make errors, which can be done unknowingly, but which can also be *akratic*. The issue with the innocence and passion traditions is that human beings seem set up for inevitable failure for which they are being punished. Because the innocence tradition finds that knowledge of the Good is so difficult to grasp, it seems that human beings have no option aside from unintentionally committing error and, furthermore, no option but punishment. The passion tradition also finds a certain helplessness in human beings as it holds that error committed knowingly is a result of the passions' overwhelming influence on the unconscious. I find that both the traditions' interpretations of the second pillar—that human beings commit error solely because of limited knowledge (innocence tradition), and that passions unconsciously cloud judgment (passion tradition)—conflict with the third pillar in the Leibnizian tripod, that God is Good and punishes justly.

Understanding Judgment

A person's volition cannot be solely directed toward the Good if God justly punishes that person. In Leibniz's system, human beings have inherited some of God's perfections, but are separate from God because of their imperfections. Leibniz describes this distinct human agency as follows:

We could call that which includes everything we express our essence or idea; since this expresses our union with God himself, it has not limits and nothing surpasses it. But that which is limited in us could be called our nature or our power.²⁸

²⁷ Hostler, 32.

²⁸ Leibniz, "Discourse," §16.

For Leibniz, the limited aspects of human nature are due to a certain division from God, such that not all components in human beings are divine inheritances. Accountability and agency must be part of human nature instead of a divine inheritance. Otherwise, Leibniz would have to admit that God authors error and punishes unjustly. Judgment, then, must be part of what is limited: the nature of humanity, its agency.

I claim that the tenability of the Leibnizian tripod is successful on the basis that humans knowingly misuse reason. As I explained in the first section, Leibniz's conception of volition is that it is composed of both the will, *conatus*, and judgment, *opinio*. I posit that volition is the product of the relation between the will, which is a divine inheritance and therefore represents infinity, and judgment, which represents finitude. As such, the will (*conatus*) is part of the essence or idea of humankind that includes divine inheritance and expresses the union with God, and judgment (*opinio*) belongs to the privative part that is necessary for human agency. It is because *akrasia* is located in *opinio* that I can maintain that the human essence, indeed a word used to translate *conatus*, is Good and always wills what is Good. Therefore, Leibniz's distinction between the essence and nature of human beings makes it possible to account for the goodness of human beings as well as their accountability for error.

Although the capability of knowingly committing error initially appears to conflict with the pillar of human goodness, I have attempted to establish an interpretation of Leibniz's moral philosophy that coincides with his claim that "he who punishes those who have done as well as it was in their power to do, is unjust."²⁹ The will, which is a divine inheritance and Good, does not knowingly will error. However, it does have the metaphysical capacity of willing error and can be deceived to do so.³⁰ As such, the innocence tradition is correct in acknowledging the dangers of ignorance. Additionally, Maitra's argument that the intellect modifies perceptions to find meaning—creating falsity to make sense of truth—may be a way in which the psychological factors of the intellect may influence volition, similar to the misuse of reason. Maitra's tradition, however, does not consider the possibility of error despite knowledge of the Good. The passion tradition, on the other hand, finds that passions may determine the choice of the agent by "traversing" judgment, causing the agent to be "deceived by appearances of good."³¹ The passion tradition does recognize an aspect of humanity that is not directed at the Good. It fails to acknowledge that human beings may freely choose actions based on reasons not according to the Good, but rather, reasons that appease passions and which render human beings accountable. Neither tradition explores how *akratic* judgment, i.e., free and conscious choice according to reason—correct or otherwise—renders divine punishment just.

By understanding *akrasia* as the intentional and free misuse of reason, Leibniz can claim that reason is tenable and infallible as long as one uses reason correctly. Leibniz's advice to humankind to not

²⁹ G. W. Leibniz, "Abridgement of the Theodicy," in *The Philosophical Works of Leibniz*, ed. George Martin Duncan (New Haven: Tuttle, Morehouse & Taylor, 1890), 201.

³⁰ Leibniz, "Discourse," §30.

³¹ Joseph, 183.



commit error can be summed up by this statement: “His empire is that of reason: he has only to prepare himself in good time to resist his passions . . .”³² In other words, the way to avoid a manipulation of reason is to use reason only to guide the will towards the Good—not to make passions appear reasonable. Leibniz is also able to render faith tenable because God always reasons correctly and thus is Good. Because of Leibniz’s allusions to the psychological, such as the conscious and subconscious, it might be possible to suppose that Leibnizian judgment may conceal or exaggerate certain components of knowledge to the self.³³ Perhaps further research and analysis of Leibniz’s psychological elements could improve an understanding of judgment that supports this articulated tenability of the Leibnizian tripod of human goodness, human error that is sometimes unintentional and sometimes *akratic*, and God’s Good punishment.

Conclusion

By employing Leibnizian *akrasia* and the interpretation of judgment put forth in this work, human beings still retain inherent goodness as stated in the first pillar of the tripod, for the will is nevertheless directed towards the Good. Judgment can function *akratically* because judgment arises as a result of privation and not divine creation, which completes the second pillar of the tripod. As such, God’s punishment can be just, which addresses the third pillar of the tripod and renders it tenable. Beyond the tripod, Leibniz is making a claim about human nature and the nature of reason. Human beings should not discard reason because it can be misused, intentionally or unintentionally, but rather, human beings should reflect on how they use reason and whether they misuse reason immorally.³⁴ It is not reason that is flawed, but rather, it is the limited nature of human beings that is the flaw. Perhaps Leibniz hoped that by practicing reason correctly, human beings might improve morally and further contribute to Goodness. ❖

³² Ibid., 184.

³³ Murray, 114.

³⁴ Leibniz, “Discourse,” §30.