

LEIBNIZ'S NEW ESSAYS

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Introduction

In his *New Essays on Human Understanding*, Leibniz presents an extended critical commentary on Locke's *Essay Concerning Human Understanding*. Leibniz read some of Locke's work in English and then, a few years later, the whole of it in French, a language in which he was more comfortable. Over a period of about two further years, on and off, he wrote his *New Essays*, which he finished at about the time Locke died and which was not published until about half a century after Leibniz's death. (He left them unpublished partly because they had been motivated by a hope of getting Locke to reply, and Locke's death put an end to that; though his character made it a forlorn hope in any case.) The *New Essays* has been an important work: for one thing, Kant read it on its first appearance, and scholars say that this was a decisive event in his philosophical development. Anyway, given that this is one of Leibniz's only two philosophical works of substantial book length, in all the torrent that poured from his pen, and given also that it is focused - critically but with respect and careful attentiveness - on the greatest classic of English philosophy, it is surprising that the *New Essays* had to wait until 1981 for a usable English translation.¹ In 1896 there was published a sort of translation by A. G. Langley;² but it is inaccurate far beyond the bounds of normal incompetence, as well as being grimly unreadable for stylistic reasons. As Chesterton once said about *The Origin of Species*, it is surprising how many people *think* they have read it, but I'll bet that nobody alive has slogged through the Langley version from cover to cover.

It is a pity that the work was not decently available in English for nearly three centuries, because even for those who can read the French of, say, Descartes, Leibniz's French is difficult. He reserved his native German for writings on history and politics, using French and Latin for philosophy and mathematics; presumably French was chosen for the *New Essays* because Leibniz wanted to respond to a popular work by a popular work. He wrote French with evident fluency, but in a somewhat awkward, German manner: It's not easy to read, and in the main English writers on early modern philosophy have not paid it much attention, sometimes even saying or implying that it is not of much significance. Now that Peter Remnant and I have produced a decently accurate and readable version, that attitude will presumably change: so long as we have done a moderately satisfactory job, Leibniz's sparkling masterpiece will shine for itself.

In this paper I shall merely pick out a few highlights, though I have chosen ones which connect with one another.

Leibniz's thought as presented in the *New Essays* differs from Locke's in the *Essay* in two dominating ways; and it differs even more sharply from the bits of the *Essay* which Leibniz selects for comment.

¹ G. W. Leibniz, *New Essays on Human Understanding*, translated and edited by Peter Remnant and Jonathan Bennett (Cambridge, 1981).

² G. W. Leibniz, *New Essays Concerning Human Understanding*, translated by A. G. Langley (La Salle, Ill., 1896).

A difference of temperament

One difference is of temperament. In Leibniz we find an unstoppable passion for rigor and precision, for bringing things under sharply edged, general principles, for following arguments through to the end; Locke is not against any of these things, but nor are they urgent driving forces within him.

Let me give one tiny example, not important but vividly illustrative of this aspect of Leibniz's cast of mind. In commenting on Locke's definitions of various "moral relations", as he calls them, Leibniz offers some of his own. One is a definition of "affinity", meaning relatedness by marriage. Leibniz first offers this definition: "Affinity is what obtains between two people if they can be blood-related to some one person without thereby being blood-related to one another - which can happen through the intervention of marriages." (249)³ That nicely fits how you are related to your in-laws: you aren't blood-related to them, but any offspring of yours will be blood-related both to you and to your father-in-law, for example. There is in the background a polite pretense that all births are legitimate, but never mind that. Leibniz notices a different objection to the definition, namely that it implies that there is "affinity" between you and your spouse, since you two are not blood-related to one another, but could be blood-related to a third person, namely your child; and, he says, that is not how the term "affinity" - really this is all about the French word *affinité* - is ordinarily used. So, he says, "perhaps it would be better to say that affinity is what obtains between two people who would be blood-related if some husband and wife were taken to be a single person". That does the job beautifully. If you and your spouse were one person, your father-in-law would be your father and would be blood-related to you. On the other hand, if you and your spouse were one person, you would not be blood-related to your spouse because you would be identical to your spouse!

Brute facts

The second big difference is that Locke believes in brute facts whereas Leibniz does not. This fact emerges in various ways, perhaps most conspicuously when Locke says that something or other must be attributed to God's good pleasure - a sheerly arbitrary act of will on the part of our maker - where Leibniz replies that God had reasons for his choice. This reflects a genuine theological opinion that it would be beneath the divine dignity to make a choice with no reason for choosing one way rather than another. But it also reflects something even deeper in Leibniz's thought, namely the principle of sufficient reason, the doctrine that every "why?" question has an answer, the doctrine that there are no brute facts.

One topic which brings this difference to the surface is the matter of primary and secondary qualities. Locke holds that when a thing looks blue, say, that is because it has such and such a minute surface texture, but that it is a sheerly brute fact that this colour-appearance goes with that texture of surface: God could just as well have brought it about that things with that texture present to us the appearance of greenness. He sometimes puts this by saying that in these cases there is no resemblance between the colour and the underlying texture.

Leibniz conjectures that there is a partial resemblance - "a resemblance in which one thing expresses another through some orderly relationship between them. Thus, an ellipse . . . has some

³ Parenthetical numbers in the text refer to page-numbers in the Berlin Academy's edition of the French text of the *New Essays*. These numbers are given in the margins of the Remnant-Bennett edition.

resemblance to the circle of which it is a projection on a plane, since there is a certain precise and natural relationship between [them], with each point on the one corresponding through a certain relation with a point on the other.” (131) Leibniz goes on to say that “This is something which the Cartesians have overlooked” - and the reference to Descartes is very much to the point. Part of what is at issue here is the Cartesian view, to which Locke also subscribed, that whatever is the case about a mind is known by the person whose mind it is; from which it follows that when in normal circumstances I see a uniform blue surface, my experienced “idea” (as Locke calls it) or “image” (as Leibniz calls it) just is uniform, simple, unstructured: if I am not aware of any inner structure in it, then it has none, since my mental state cannot have features which are hidden from my awareness. Leibniz will have none of this. More than once when Locke describes some mental content as simple, Leibniz says that it only appears simple, and that if we knew more we would know about its inner complexity of structure. Thus, he thinks that when I see a blue surface I am in a complex changing mental state which does partially resemble the external surface which I am seeing. “When the organ and the intervening medium are properly constituted, the internal bodily motions and the ideas [or images] which represent them to the soul, resemble the motions of the object which cause the colour They express the object through some rather precise relationship; though this relation does not appear distinctly to us, because we cannot disentangle this multitude of minute impressions, whether in our soul or in our body or in what lies outside us.” (132f)

I applaud this move away from the Cartesian view - which did harm to the work of Hume as well as of Locke - that we are omniscient about the contents of our minds. I am less enthusiastic about that use of the move, that is, about the conjecture that a sensed appearance of blue involves mental “movements” which can somehow be mapped on to the movements in the surface which causes it. But insofar as it is an attempt to reduce the amount of brute-factuality in the world, I think we should regard it as on the side of rationality and intellectual health.

The Molyneux problem

Another, more patently successful attack on the brute-fact matter comes in Leibniz’s treatment of the famous Molyneux problem. If a man who was born blind, but who has learned the meanings of shape-words through touch, regains his sight and is visually confronted with a sphere and a cube, will he be able to tell, purely visually, what he is confronted by? This question has been much debated; and not long ago a whole book was devoted to discussing it and reporting the data about people in the 20th century who have regained their sight as adults and have been subjected to something like Molyneux’s test. The results, I believe, have been inconclusive, because usually the patient is confused and dazed, and has trouble visually picking out objects from backgrounds at all; and by the time he is competent at that, he has inevitably had opportunities to correlate sight with touch. Still, a question remains, and it is really the one that interested Locke and Leibniz: is it in principle possible for the man, going by reasons and not guesswork, to pick out the cube and the sphere as what they are? Locke says “No” - it is a sheer brute fact that things which look thus feel so, and the correlation between look and feel must be empirically learned. Leibniz says “No” to the question on one interpretation of it and “Yes” on another: he is right that the question, as posed in the *Essay*, is genuinely ambiguous, because it doesn’t say whether the man who has just regained his sight is told that the objects in front of him are indeed a cube and a sphere, without being told which is which. If that is the situation, and all he has to decide is which is which, then, says Leibniz, he does have something he can steer by: he knows that a globe has no tactually

distinguished points, whereas a cube has eight of them; and in the visual appearance of the two objects, one appearance will have distinguished points while the other will not. Our man therefore has some reason to say “This is the sphere, that the cube” and to get it right. That still makes it a contingent matter that a cube looks the way it does, and that a sphere looks the way it does: the correlation can’t be established *a priori*; but it is no longer such a sheerly inexplicable brute-fact matter as Locke makes it out to be. In his treatment of this, Leibniz seems to me to be perfectly right.

I shall report on other aspects of his treatment of the Molyneux problem, since, taken all together, it strikes me as amazingly good and perhaps perfect.

For one thing, he anticipates the 20th century findings about what actually happens in the hospital room. After saying that if the newly sighted man has only a “Which is which?” problem then he can solve it, Leibniz adds: “I am not talking about what he might actually do on the spot, when he is dazzled and confused by the strangeness.”

Also, his account of why the man couldn’t solve the problem if he were not told anything about what was in front of him is sound and deep. From Locke’s discussion one might get the impression of the man as saying “I can see that there are two objects there, but I don’t know what they are.” Leibniz sees (and perhaps Locke does too, but he doesn’t say so) that the incapacity goes much deeper than that: “It will not at once occur to him that these pictures, as it were, that he forms at the back of his eyes, which could come from a flat painting on the table, represent bodies.”

Finally, if the man is not told that there is a sphere and a cube in front of him and given the theoretically soluble “Which is which?” problem, then he can’t know what he is confronted by until . . . what? Locke clearly implies that what is needed is experience correlating the visual with the tactual - he must touch them and see them. Leibniz says that that is one way he could do it, but not the only one. He makes the point that a blind man can learn the laws of optics; if, with that information, he watches the sphere and the cube rolling and attends to the changing shadows that they cause, it is in principle possible for him to work out that they are bodies, and what bodies they are. Or - Leibniz adds with fanatical thoroughness - he could work it out if the cube and the sphere remained still and the source of light were moved in appropriate ways; that too would generate patterns of changing shadows from which, in conjunction with his knowledge of optics, he could in principle infer the truth about what was going on.

The mind as a blank page

The Molyneux problem, and the matter of colours and underlying textures, are two bits of the general theme of contingent facts which are not brute facts: in each case, Leibniz thinks that God could indeed have arranged things differently but that it wasn’t arbitrary that he chose the arrangement which he did choose. As well as other aspects of this theme, there is also a lot of disagreement between him and Locke on the matter of genuinely downright necessary truth. The best known part of this disagreement is the famous controversy over whether there are any ideas which are possessed - or truths which are known - innately. Locke holds that all the human mind has in the way of an innate endowment is a set of skills or aptitudes; its knowledge and beliefs and “ideas” all come through the impact of experience on the mind. When Locke stresses the importance of experience by saying that without it the human mind is a blank page. this is misleading even by his own lights: the “blank page” metaphor suggests a degree of unstructured passivity in the mind’s reception of sensory influence which goes beyond anything Locke seriously

believed in. The exaggeration also occurs in this metaphor of Locke's: "The understanding is not much unlike a closet wholly shut from light, with only some little openings left to let in external visible images; would the images coming into such a dark room but stay there, and lie so orderly as to be found upon occasion, it would very much resemble the understanding of a man." (144) Leibniz protests that it can't be as simple as that - as though all that is needed is for the sun to shine and a little opening to be left. He says: "To increase the resemblance we should have to postulate that there is a screen in the dark room to receive the [images], and that it is not uniform but is diversified by folds representing items of innate knowledge; and, what is more, this screen or membrane, being under tension, has a kind of elasticity or active force, and indeed that it acts (or reacts) in ways which are adapted both to past folds and to new ones coming from impressions [from outside] . . . This analogy would explain reasonably well what goes on in the brain. As for the soul, . . . without being extended it represents these various extended masses and has perceptions of them." (144f) That seems good to me; but the very fact that Locke might on reflection have agreed with it shows that it doesn't go to the heart of the matter.

Leibniz wants to say not only that the soul or mind of man has inherent structure and complexity, but also that it has as part of its birth-right a stock of concepts or notions or "ideas", and also a stock of items of knowledge. And Locke is at pains to deny this. I shall say a little about this debate insofar as it concerns innate knowledge. Although it is not a very satisfactory debate, a lot can be learned from thinking hard about it.

Knowledge about necessity

Many of Locke's objections to the doctrine of innate knowledge are based on what Leibniz regards as a too demanding criterion for what such knowledge would have to be like. For example, Locke implies that if we innately know something then everyone will know it from birth, nobody will have to be taught it or in any way helped to know it. Leibniz replies: "I cannot accept the proposition that whatever is learned is not innate. The truths about numbers are in us, but still we learn them ' ' ' ." (85) (Incidentally, the French uses the verb "*laisser*" in a certain idiom which I have just rendered correctly - it has the force of a "still" or a "nevertheless". But Langley knew it only as the verb meaning "leave", and so he has Leibniz saying: "The truths of numbers are in us, but we are not left to learn them", which makes perfect nonsense of the passage.) That reply might be all right, but only if it is accompanied by some account of what it is for a bit of knowledge to be innate if its owner also needs to learn it.

Well, for a start, Leibniz holds that the learning is a process of becoming aware of knowledge which one possesses already; this is another place where it is relevant that he doesn't think we are omniscient about the contents of our own minds. But he still needs to explain what it means to say that the knowledge is really there in advance of the person's being aware of it.

Locke anticipates one answer to this and tries to head it off. You might think that everyone innately possesses certain knowledge in the sense of being born with a capacity to acquire the knowledge. But that, he says in effect, trivializes the doctrine of innate knowledge, because it makes "innate" - in this degenerate dispositional sense - every item of knowledge which anybody ever actually comes to possess. After all, if I do now know that the San Andreas fault lies along the intersection of two tectonic plates, I must always have had the capacity eventually to possess this knowledge. Leibniz's reply to this is as follows: "It is not a mere possibility of understanding these truths: it is rather a disposition, an aptitude, a preformation, which determines our soul and brings it about that they are derivable from it. Just as there is a difference between the shapes

which are arbitrarily given to a piece of marble and those which its veins already indicate or are disposed to indicate if the sculptor avails himself of them.” (80) Although he often alludes to these active rather than passive dispositions, I am not convinced that Leibniz has any clear concept of them. It is suspicious that he compares them with the veins in a block of marble, for there is nothing in the least dispositional about a vein.

However, in this passage as in some others where Leibniz invokes the notion of an active disposition or the like, something better is also being said, namely that our soul is of such a kind that these truths are derivable from it. If Leibniz had properly isolated that part of his answer, he might have replied to Locke along these lines: - “It’s true that if I eventually come to be aware of knowing that P, then I must have been born with a capacity eventually to be aware of knowing that P. But for me to have that capacity is just for something of the form

If it becomes the case that Q, then I shall be aware of knowing that P
to be the case; and capacities of this sort split into two importantly different classes, depending on what sort of proposition Q is, i.e. depending on what is needed for me to have and be aware of having the knowledge that P. For some values of P, I can acquire aware knowledge that P only if I have appropriate sense-experience, and for other values I will acquire aware knowledge that P just so long as I survive to maturity, or sit and think in the right way, or the like. When someone comes to be aware of knowing that P as a result of experience, he has presumably just acquired the knowledge; but when it happens just as a result of thinking, or maturation, or in some other way without help from outside, we can reasonably suppose that he had the knowledge all along and that this recent event is merely his becoming aware of it.”

But that cannot be Leibniz’s whole line of defence. It marks off as arguably innate any cases where we become aware of knowing that P without having any help from sensory input. But Leibniz thinks that in some cases of innate knowledge the awareness of the knowledge *does* come from the senses. That was his point about the “learning” which is not acquisition of knowledge: he admits that the senses - and especially the hearing of a teacher’s words - have a part to play, without which we would not become aware of knowing that P; but, he says, the teacher’s words do not insert knowledge into us but merely “bring to life what was already within us” (76). With regard to those cases, he does not independently explain - does not bring down to earth - the claim that the knowledge is already within us and that our teachers merely bring it to life, making us aware of it.

Leibniz thinks that *some* knowledge must have been there all along, namely knowledge about which truths are necessarily true - e.g. that the square of any even number must be divisible by 4. Leibniz plausibly holds that although the senses could entitle us to think that it always has been the case that P, they could never instruct us that it absolutely always must be the case that P.

Leibniz is very good on necessary truths. In several places in the *Essay* Locke picks on various necessary truths - sometimes called “maxims”, sometimes “trifling propositions”, and represents them as trivial, unimportant, uninformative. Leibniz variously opposes this denigrating tendency, his own view being that necessary truths have a part to play in all our intellectual activities. In one place he makes this point through a builder’s metaphor followed by an anatomist’s: “They enter into our thoughts, serving as their inner core and as their mortar. Even if we give no thought to them, they are necessary for thought, as muscles and tendons are for walking.” (83f) Incidentally, the hapless Langley, knowing of only one meaning each for *âme* and *liaison*, and apparently not owning a French dictionary, turned the builder’s metaphor into nonsense by making Leibniz say that necessary truths enter into our thoughts “of which they are the soul and the connexion”.

Leibniz is right that one ought to have a tenable account of how we know that certain propositions are necessary. But I am afraid that he does not have one himself. He says only that we can know that it is necessary that P because we can find P inscribed in our souls by God. Is he assuming that a lie could not be written on a soul? If so, he gives no reason for thinking so. And if that is not his assumption, then his position about knowledge of necessity is altogether mysterious.

Locke on necessary truths

What about Locke? Although less impressed by necessary truths than Leibniz is, he does think that there are some, and that they are known; so he too needs an epistemology of them.

Before coming to that, I want to give myself the pleasure of reporting an episode where Locke somewhat uncharacteristically argues that more things can be dealt with by reason - or that more propositions are necessarily true - than is commonly recognized. Specifically, he says that truths in morals and politics can be known by reason, i.e. seen to be necessary merely by sitting and thinking clearly. He gives two examples, of which the second is: "Where there is no property, there is no injustice." (384). Leibniz swiftly and efficiently shows that this is either false or inapplicable, depending on how we understand it. Taken in the most natural way, it is false; for even if we lived in a state where there was no property, someone might for instance be unjustly imprisoned. So, says Leibniz, Locke will have to say that a person's property includes his potential actions, and that the imprisoned man is being unjustly deprived of some of that property; but then - he adds smoothly - there could not be a human society in which there was no property, and so there could be no application for the proposition that where there is no property there is no injustice. This is not a particularly important matter, but I get pleasure from seeing it done so well.

But that is by the way. My topic is Locke's need for an account of how necessary truths are known. He has an account of this. Specifically, he treats necessary truths as truths which one knows by looking inwards: to that extent he agrees with Leibniz, but then they part company. Whereas Leibniz thinks that I know that P is necessary because I look inwards and see P written there, Locke thinks that when I look inwards I see a certain basis for the judgment that P is necessary - but not a ready-made mental representation of P itself. According to Locke, what makes a proposition necessary is some fact about connections between ideas: that every triangle must have three sides is absolutely necessary, Locke thinks, because of how the idea *triangle* relates to the ideas *three* and *side*; and he takes these ideas to be mental items whose characteristics we learn by looking in at them. And so we get him talking of truths which are known by "intuition", as he calls it, i.e. known by a single, simple act of introspection; these include such truths as that "I am now thinking about Chicago" and that "A triangle has three sides". This is clearly an unholy mixture of two very different sorts of truths - one psychological and the other logical - which Locke conflates because quite generally he runs the psychological together with the logical, treating them both as involving "ideas".

It is customary to say that Locke used the term "idea" to cover images or sense-data or sensory states on the one hand, and intellectual states or episodes or processes on the other. So he did, and in the *New Essays* Leibniz repeatedly pulls him up on it, insisting that sensory images are entirely different from intellectual ideas. For example, when Locke says that I cannot easily distinguish my "idea" of a 1000-sided figure from my "idea" of a 999-sided figure, Leibniz says that I may have trouble with the images but not with the ideas; it may be hard to know which sort of figure I am seeing or feeling, but it can't be difficult to know which figure I am thinking about;

any more - he adds devastatingly - than I am likely to be in doubt about which number I am thinking about (261). Of course Locke had in mind the difficulty of knowing which sort of figure one is seeing or imagining or mentally depicting; but since he thought that all thinking is operating with mental *depictions* - i.e. with “ideas” of a fundamentally sensory kind - he took the difficulty about what one is seeing to be also a difficulty about what one is thinking of.

I mention this conflation only in order to set it aside. Contrary to what has been said by most recent writers on early modern philosophy, including me, Locke uses the word “idea” as a vehicle for two quite distinct conflations, or for smudging two different lines. One is a line between mental items - the one I have been discussing between sensory episodes and intellectual ones. The other is the line between mental intellectual items and logical items. I shall explain.

Set aside images and sense-data and everything like that, and consider only . . . well, let’s say *concepts*. Now, we can speak of my concept of a triangle, meaning the bit of thinking that is going on in my mind on some particular occasion when I think about triangles, or meaning the kind of thinking that occurs in my mind whenever I think about triangles, but we can also speak of *the* concept of a triangle, meaning an objective, interpersonal item which can play a part in my thinking or in yours, and which is at least *prima facie* capable of existing even if it has no role in anyone’s thinking. Frege, for one, inheriting a dualist tradition according to which there are mental items and physical ones, said that “a third realm must be recognized”, which contains the logical items - the concepts and propositions which are not thinkings and believings but which are involved in, and are perhaps the objects of, thinkings and believings. I am not endorsing outright third-realmerly: for all I know, interpersonal logical items are really constructs out of facts about how men think, or constructs out of the meanings of sentences, or whatever. But we ought to stay with third-realmerly until we can work our way out of it; it cannot be right to avoid it by just ignoring the apparent difference between the states of our minds when we think about triangles and the concept of triangle which is the source of the necessity of the proposition that triangles have three sides.

Leibniz on psychology and logic

Leibniz knew that facts about how people think are different from truths of logic; but his grasp of this was somewhat weakened by the fact that he did regard logic as divine psychology. That is, the interpersonal “ideas” which are the source of necessary truths are, he said, ideas in the mind of God “whose understanding is the domain of eternal truths” (447). As for his famous account of logical truth as truth about possible worlds, it doesn’t exist: there is no evidence that Leibniz ever said such a thing. Even if he had, since he also seems to have thought that possible worlds exist only in the mind of God,⁴ he would still have been involved in equating logic with divine psychology. That tendency in his thought may have prevented him from very sharply taking up Locke’s conflation with psychology.

Be that as it may, Locke did make the conflation, and did accordingly run together elementary truths of logic with first person, present tense, psychological statements. One thing which no doubt encouraged him in this - and also encouraged Hume, who followed suit - was the plausible belief that each of these kinds of truth is somehow basic, a starting-point. Leibniz saw

⁴ See, for instance, things he wrote to Arnauld, reprinted in G. W. Leibniz, *Philosophical Papers and Letters*, edited by L. E. Loemker, second edition (Dordrecht, 1969), at pp. 333, 336.

this similarity between them, while also holding them to be utterly different: each is in its own way basic or ultimate, but one of them is basic in the manner of a contingent truth of fact, while the other is basic in the manner of a necessary truth, a truth of reason. He puts the package like this:

The immediate awareness of our existence and of our thoughts provides us with the first *a posteriori truths* of fact . . . while identical propositions [e.g. that whatever is white is white] embody the first *a priori truths* of reason. . . . Neither kind admits of proof, and each can be called “immediate” - the former because nothing comes between the understanding and its object, the latter because nothing comes between the subject and the predicate. (p. 434)

I don't know whether this is right, but I am very fond of it. In an identical truth - i.e. the most basic and elementary sort of logical truth - the subject comes hard up against the predicate, so that there is no room in between for proof or derivation or the like; and in a truth about my own present state of mind, I come up hard against that state of mind, which is immediately given to my awareness, so that there is no room in between for me to be led astray in some manner. In each case there is immediacy - as Leibniz says, '*il y a immédiation*' - but of quite different kinds, one producing unprovable necessary truth, the other producing incorrigible contingent truth.

In that passage Leibniz credits us with a certain infallibility in our positive beliefs and impressions about our states of mind: if it seems to me that I have a green-type image, then I do have one. But that is not to concede infallibility in our negative beliefs and impressions about those states, for the latter kind of infallibility comes close to that omniscience which Leibniz firmly rejects. Thus, for instance, my impression that my green-type image is “simple” is essentially negative - it is the impression that the image does not have inner structure - and so it may very well be wrong, for there may be structure there which is hidden from my awareness.

I think I ought to report what Langley does with the beautiful little passage last quoted. The crucial point is that my phrase “nothing comes between” is Remnant's and my rendering of Leibniz's '*il y a immédiation entre*, literally meaning “there is immediacy between”. Well, Langley has him say:

Both are incapable of proof, and may be called immediate; the former, because they are immediate between the understanding and its object; the latter, because they are intermediate between the subject and the predicate.

I defy anybody to work out from that what Leibniz actually said!

I have to confess that I think it very unlikely that a satisfactory theory of necessary truth can emerge from the notion of truths written on our souls, or the notion of truths about God's mind, or - finally - from the notion of truths in which nothing comes between the subject and the predicate. The nature of necessary truth, and in particular the fact that we can know that certain truths are necessary, constitutes a problem which I think was unsolved in the 17th century and remains unsolved today.

Why do we act?

Many interesting things in the *New Essays* are quite unrelated to Leibniz's rationalist hostility to brute facts, emphasis upon necessary truth, and so on. I shall sketch just one of these.

It concerns Locke's theory about what prompts people to act purposively, by which I mean “rationally act so as to bring about some state of affairs” (163f, 188). You might think that there could be no theory about this, and that different actions come from different sources, with nothing in common amongst them; but Locke thought that something is common to all of them, namely

uneasiness. According to him, whenever a person acts, he is trying to relieve his uneasiness, and once he has succeeded in this he will stop acting.

This may seem implausible and groundless, but Locke has a serious reason for it. If I act purposively, I am trying to bring about some state of affairs S, such as my being on the other side of the room or my having given a talk to this audience. Now, why should I work to bring about S? The answer must be that I prefer a world where S obtains to one where it doesn't - which, Locke thinks, is to say that my present non-S condition is unsatisfactory to me: I walk across the room because it is a defect in my present situation that I am on this side of the room; if I were perfectly content to be where I am, my walking would be unintelligible. Well, "uneasiness" is Locke's name for my mentally registering that my present condition is not satisfactory to me; and so he says that all purposive actions are at bottom attempts to relieve uneasiness.

I find this theory of Locke's plausible and persuasive, but I agree with Leibniz (164-6, 188f) that it cannot be right. If Locke's theory were right, Leibniz says, then any purposeful activity would involve an element of dissatisfaction or discontent, an unpleasantness or a mild suffering; and full contentment would set in only when the goal was achieved. But in fact the pursuit of the goal is often much more satisfying than the achievement of it. In that last claim, Leibniz is surely right: our greatest satisfactions come from having goals and some chance of achieving them; some of the most miserable people are those with no goals, nothing to work towards; yet if Locke were right these people would be better off than those of us who still have some uneasiness to cure.

Now, Leibniz offers a replacement theory which differs from Locke's only in one respect; whereas Locke speaks of "uneasiness", taking it to be a consciously felt discontent, Leibniz speaks only of a "disquiet" which he takes to be a state of disequilibrium, unevenness of tension within the body: the body strives to remove this through inner adjustments which sometimes lead to perceptible movements of limbs, vocal cords and so on. The crucial difference between this and Lockean uneasiness is that Leibniz's "disquiet" may lie below the threshold of awareness: it is not part of his theory that we feel it within ourselves and set out to remedy it; rather, our responses to imbalances within our bodies happen purely mechanically and unconsciously, though when they occur on a large enough scale they will force themselves upon our awareness, and then we shall be doing what we ordinarily call acting voluntarily or purposefully. It is important to Leibniz that he can use this theory to explain not only purposive behaviour but also conduct which has no goal and which one might think to be arbitrary, e.g. turning to the right rather than the left during an aimless ramble through a town:

These impulses like so many little springs trying to unwind and so driving our machine along This is why we are never indifferent, even when we appear to be most so, as for instance over whether to turn left or right at the end of a lane. For the choice that we make arises from these insensible stimuli which, mingled with the actions of objects and of our bodily interiors, make us find one direction of movement more comfortable than the other. In German, the word for the balance of a clock is *Unruhe* - which also means disquiet; and one can take that for a model of how it is in our bodies, which can never be perfectly at their ease. For if one's body were at ease, some new effect of objects - some small change in the sense-organs, and in the viscera and bodily cavities - would at once alter the balance and compel those parts of the body to exert some tiny effort to get back into the best state possible; with the result that there is a perpetual conflict which makes up, so to speak, the disquiet of our clock. (167)

I love this passage about the disquiet which drives our machine along, and for years I thought that Leibniz's theory corrected the vital flaw in Locke's. But it doesn't:

Leibniz has put a cosmetic covering over what is wrong in Locke's theory, but has not cured it. Because he has replaced conscious uneasiness by often unconscious disquiet, Leibniz can say that activity need not involve conscious unpleasantness. But he still associates activity with there being something less than ideal, with being in less than "the best state possible"; and so he is as much committed as Locke is to the profoundly untrue conclusion that the most fully satisfactory state, in which there is nothing wrong, nothing to remedy, will be one of complete inactivity. Here again he is making allowance for activity to be enjoyable, but right at the end he again implies that the best state is one of inactivity:

Nature has given us the spurs of desire in the form of rudiments or elements of suffering, semi-suffering one might say. This lets us enjoy the advantage of evil without enduring its inconveniences; for otherwise, if this perception were too distinct, one would always be miserable when looking forward to something good; whereas our continual victory over these semi-sufferings provides us with many semi-pleasures; and the continuation and accumulation of these eventually becomes a whole, genuine pleasure. In fact, without these semi-sufferings there would be no pleasure at all, nor any way of being aware that something is helping and relieving us by removing obstacles which stand between us and our ease. (165)

That phrase about things which "stand between us and our ease" reveals that Leibniz has taken over the main defect in Locke's theory. It's all very well for Leibniz to say that there would be no pleasure if there were no obstacles to overcome; but when he describes them as obstacles to 'our ease' - obstacles to our being in a condition we would prefer to be in - he inevitably implies that if the obstacles did not exist then, even if we didn't have pleasure, we would be in a state which was perfectly satisfactory to us. And we know that that is wrong.

It is one thing to be sure that the Locke-Leibniz kind of theory is wrong; it is another to replace it by a true theory which captures whatever is true in theirs and pinpoints where they went astray. In conclusion I shall make a brief attempt at doing this.

If I am trying to bring it about that S obtains, then I regard its obtaining as better than . . . what? Better than my present situation? Locke and Leibniz say "Yes", and that's their error: it's an error because it may well be that S does now obtain and my goal is merely to make it continue to obtain; for example, if I step back so as not to fall over a cliff, I am not trying to remedy a defect in my situation, but rather to prevent one from occurring. Quite generally, I submit, if each purposive action is motivated by a comparison, it is not a comparison of a possible future with the present, but rather of one possible future with another. I step back from the edge of the crumbling cliff because I prefer the future which will follow from my stepping back to the future which will follow from my staying where I am; and my attitude to my present condition is irrelevant to this. Even if my goal is to change something - and usually it *is* - my actions are not always attempts to remedy defects. I want to make S obtain, and now it doesn't; so I prefer its obtaining (later on) to its not obtaining (later on); that doesn't imply that I set out after S because of dissatisfaction with the present state of affairs.

Once we are clear about this elementary point, we can easily avoid the trouble that Locke and Leibniz are in. Their account implies that if my condition were perfectly satisfactory to me I would not act, and this collides uncomfortably with the known fact that if I were not active my condition would *ipso facto* be unsatisfactory to me. This is not an inconsistency, but it does generate a mad argument for the conclusion that it is impossible to be in a satisfactory condition: if I were, I would have no unease or disquiet; so I would have no motive for acting; so I would

not act; so my condition would be unsatisfactory to me. Perhaps it *is* impossible to be in a perfectly satisfactory condition, but it is not shown to be so by that argument!

In my account, the argument doesn't go through. My having a goal can now be seen not to imply that anything is wrong with how I am at present. All it implies about my present condition is that, for some state of affairs S, (i) I prefer S's later obtaining to its not later obtaining, and (ii) I think that my behaviour can affect S's chances of obtaining. That is a *fact* about my present condition, but we are under no philosophical pressure to suppose it to be a *defect*. Not to be in that condition would involve either not caring about any aspect of the future, or caring about some aspects of it but thinking one had no control over them. Either way, it is a dreadful prospect.

Still, I am grateful to Locke and Leibniz for their wrong contributions to this problem, and especially to Leibniz for calling attention to two defects in Locke's account and then leaving the worse of them unremedied in his own treatment. This created a challenge which I have tried to meet; and in the course of working on it, I think I have learned something. The *New Essays* is like that all through: often wrong, but endlessly interesting and instructive.

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