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HUMBLING THE RATIONAL: A HUMEAN CRITIQUE OF LEIBNIZ'S PRINCIPLE OF SUFFICIENT REASON

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Abstract

"Why is there something rather than nothing?" asked 17th-century polymath and philosopher G.W. Leibniz. Indeed, it is this query which still looms over metaphysics today. To Leibniz, the fact that every effect has a cause led to his commitment to what philosophers refer to as the principle of sufficient reason. However, does every derivative genuinely derive from some derivation? If not, what ramifications would this error have on the Leibnizian project? This piece will begin with an explication concerning some main instances in the Leibnizian corpus, where Leibniz gives argumentative support for the principle of sufficient reason. Next, this article will enter the perspective of 18th-century philosopher David Hume, who by denying the sturdiness of causal relations, assisted in jeopardizing this backbone of Leibnizian thought. Lastly, this essay will close with support for Hume's account of causality over Leibniz's, by drawing the reader to consider the problems uncovered by Hume, and their impact on Leibnizian metaphysics, via discrediting the principle of sufficient reason.

Keywords: Leibniz; Hume; Epistemology; Principle of Sufficient Reason; Causality; Induction;

1. UNPACKING LEIBNIZ'S PRINCIPLE OF SUFFICIENT REASON

In Leibniz's *Principles of Nature and Grace, Based on Reason*, he asserts that nothing ever happens in which an explanation is undiscoverable as to why that occurrence manifested as it did, and not in any other way (Leibniz 1989, 30-31, 209-210.) Leibniz also adheres to the view that as one accumulates more knowledge of what led to what he/she is attempting to know, the less challenging will that endeavor be (Leibniz 1989, 30-31, 209-210.) Now, Leibniz connects these beliefs, with what he claims is the ultimate reason explaining all existence; God (Leibniz 1989, 209-210.) One sufficient reason as to why God is a cause, or theoretic requirement to explain life, is that Leibniz thinks material things, left alone and considered in isolation, possess no inclination to motion or rest, strengthening the idea that God is an immaterial principle (Leibniz 1989, 209-210, 211-13.) That is because a principle is imperceptible and since Leibniz attributes no natural motion to what one defines as purely bodily, it

cannot be that anything material bears a predisposition to movement or inertia, rendering the reality of motion, to ultimately be a result of God (Leibniz 1989, 125-127, 207-210.)

More abstractly, Leibniz invites his readers to consider why this immaterial cause, God, must stand outside of creation, or the domain of contingent things (Leibniz 1989, 209-210.) As understood by Leibniz, God is exterior to his/her effect, the universe, since to posit the question as to what the ultimate cause of a series of contingent things is, one must begin by first assuming an answer is uncoverable (Leibniz 1989, 209-210.) That is because no success in solving the riddle of existence is achievable if one only decides to look back on ephemeral causes, infinitely (Leibniz 1989, 209-210.)

Accordingly, one must ground his/her answer in an external cause which started that series, whom Leibniz asserts is God or that purely immaterial and permanently active origin of all life (Leibniz 1989, 209-210.) Hence, one could sufficiently justify that the most secure foundation for existence, is an immaterial and everlasting sustainer, who explains and guarantees the continuity of reality (Leibniz 1989, 209-211.) For not only is God more soundly an immaterial entity, who is best fit to explain the *phenomena* of motion, due to what is utterly corporeal being unable to move alone, the Divine must also be unswayable (Leibniz 1989, 209-211.) One reason for this is that one could only attribute a cause of that magnitude to such an entity, to justify the constant activity found in nature (Leibniz 1989, 209-211.) Lastly, God must be distinct from nature, and thus, exterior to it, since only the Divine is necessary for existence unlike everything else which exists contingently, or in such a way that not all life need to rely on it, to persist.

Leibniz further ties his principle of sufficient reason to the idea of God's omnipotence as he investigates why it is that something exists, for nothing would be easier to generate. Now, Leibniz resolves this puzzle by appealing to God, as being the best explanation, or sufficient reason for the reality of life, since, only an entity containing the highest level of perfection can establish life's goodness (Leibniz 1989, 210.) One reason why Leibniz believes existence is a type of perfection is that justice is a reality, which deals with good and evil, and since evil is a form of deprivation, and because nature could never die but merely change, indicating its limitlessness, assists in grounding that life is good (Leibniz 1989, 207, 210.) Thus, by analyzing and gaining knowledge of reality, and the perfections that appear to be present in it, Leibniz would assert is sufficient grounds to uncover not only the reality of God but also that the Divine's essence is optimal.

From this, Leibniz continues to assert that it is sufficient to declare that God always chooses the best that could be. For as the most optimal entity, it is only like the essence of the Divine to perform those tasks which would lead to the best possible outcomes (Leibniz 1989, 211-213.) Now, to understand what Leibniz believes by the best possible result of all possibilities, readers should first consider his idea that God, as a transcendent entity, or *meta*-monad, displays only those perfections findable in the universe (Leibniz 1989, 211-213, 218-222.) That is because aside from the Creator and the constant flow of Creation, nothing more could be actual (Leibniz 1989, 211-213, 218-222.) Indeed, to Leibniz, people's every day and naïve understanding of perfection, as equating to that quality of the Almighty, who could make all possibilities actual at once, in a way that would satisfy everyone's desires unlimitedly, fails to capture the reality of how the Creator intended life (Leibniz 1989, 211-213, 218-222.) That is because one may compare God to a good shepherd, who maintains his/her flock while also giving them the freedom to roam, to refine and value their coexistence (Leibniz 1989, 211-213, 218-222, Ezekiel 34:23, 37:24, John 10:27, Isaiah 40:11, & Psalm 23: 1-2.) As such, God neither acts against his/her wisdom to rectify nor his/her compassion to allow people to choose, which Leibniz would believe further grounds God as perfectly perfect or the purest of pure entities (Leibniz 1989, 211-213, 218-222, Ezekiel 34:23, 37:24, John 10:27, Isaiah 40:11, & Psalm 23:1-2.) Finally, Leibniz would assert, that miscomprehending perfection, derives from people's limited capacities to know reality with the same clarity as the Almighty, which shows through their frivolously confusing central features of necessary and sufficient causation (Leibniz 1989, 28-30, 30-35, & 35-37.)

Another instance of Leibniz's explanation of the principle of sufficient reason is in his examination of the difference between necessary and sufficient causes, and how God, or that grand unifying theory elucidating all of existence, is both valid and sound (Leibniz 1989, 28-30, 30-35, & 35-37.) Now, as understood by Leibniz a necessary cause is that which one could only conceive as being the

producer of an inevitable effect (Leibniz 1989, 28-30, 30-35, & 35-37.) So that the reader may better understand the spirit of what Leibniz is trying to capture, one may refer to the Kantian example of the impossibility of successfully ideating a four-sided triangle or a three-sided square (Leibniz 1989, 28-30, 30-35, Kant 1998, 559-570, & Jaspers 1993, 172-179.) That is, Leibniz, like Kant after him, would assert that there is truth in the belief that there exist permanent aspects of the universe, which the mind cannot bypass, indicating that a certain level of harmony is present in the natural order (Leibniz 1989, 28-30, 30-35, Kant 1998, 559-570, & Jaspers 1993, 172-179.) This agreeableness, or the seamless coherence between an entity's essence and representation, gives credence to the Leibnizian theory of pre-established harmony, for the cosmos, *qua phenomenon*, appears orderly, providing sufficient reason to infer that a cause was responsible for that appearance (Leibniz 1989, 35-37, 207-208.) Thus, at one tier, one may assert that God is conceptually necessary to explain eternal truths and that those truths can validly fall under God for their cause (Leibniz 1989, 35-37, 207-208.)

At the same time, one may also declare that the reality of life by bearing signs of design and structure, is sufficient reason to believe that a designer ultimately mapped out and constructed what is present in existence (Leibniz 1989, 35-37, 207-208.) Lastly, because one could sufficiently trace existence back to God as its immaterial substratum, while also integrating all essentialities, like necessary truths, to architect a formulaic expression depicting God, helps to justify that arguing for the Divine is doable both soundly and validly (Leibniz 1989, 35-37, 207-208.)

2. HUME'S CHALLENGE TO CAUSATION

From a radically different approach to the topic of causation, comes 18th-century philosopher David Hume, whose dissection of rationalist metaphysics, including Leibnizian philosophy, starts with his distinction between matters of fact and relations of ideas (Hume 1993, 15-16.) Now, as understood by Hume, support for the method of inference, assuring that if one discursively reasons about abstractions alone, without the need of experience, to uncover truths, is a faulty paradigm indeed (Hume 1993, 15-16.) First, Hume asserts that experience is, in fact, requisite for one to be able to reflect and reason about ideas since without first experiencing and intaking the *phenomena* available in the natural order, no mind would be able to depict what it is contemplating or considering via thought (Hume 1993, 9-10, 15-16.)

To Hume, this predicament of human knowledge, or the inability to conceive ideas without initially perceiving examples of them in the world, derives from the fact that objects emit a representation which one must first register, as verifiable by the experience of those objects being agreeable to how one usually encounters those things (Hume 1993, 12, 16-17.)

In other words, Hume would assert that people could only agree about what an object is because their minds possess capacities to regard things in such a way that they match the appearance they exude, which the customariness of the feelings one regularly feels when interacting with an object, occasions (Hume 1993, 12-14, 19-20.) However, the reader should note that Hume does not believe objects exist in a permanent or guaranteed way, which leads him to explicate his understanding of matters of fact (Hume 1993, 15.)

By matters of fact, Hume believes that which regularly occurs in the world, to the extent that people regard it as a surety, when, it is, more accurately, inductive (Hume 1993, 27-29.) For although many individuals may regard something like the idea of the sun not rising tomorrow as an absurdity, Hume would persist to point out that it is still not contradictory to reason that it cannot (Hume 1993, 20-22.) This capacity, or the mind's ability to envision something as other than what it is, or absent altogether, shows that there exists little room for valid deductive proofs or justifications which block the mind from imagining or conceiving any other possible explanation, explaining whatever is in question (Hume 1993, 24-25, 28-31, & 33.) In other words, to Hume, the possibility of conceiving and imagining the world as other than what it is, is not nil, and this serves as the foundation for his onslaught against causality's supposed undeniableness (Hume 1993, 24-25, 28-31, & 33.)

First, Hume draws his readers to consider something like gravity, which is impossible to directly experience, making it impossible to know validly (Hume 1993, 16-18, 39-44.) That is because gravity is an immaterial principle, and without any knowable characteristics that could be subject to the scrutiny of

the senses, no one would be able to reflect and form ideas concerning gravity without running into logical contradictions (Hume 1993, 16-18, 39-44.) To Hume, this is the case, for if ideas ultimately derive from sensory impressions, then that renders ideas never to be genuine ideas, but instead remnants of experience (Hume 1993, 9-13.) Also, the fact that reason runs into obstacles, when employing ideas alone, such as the case with analytic proofs of God's existence Hume asserts never convinces or forces the mind to negate the possibility of there not being a God; helping to assert that what is imperceptible can never be indubitably sure (Hume 1993, 39-44.) So that the reader may better understand Hume's criticism of causation, another example concerning gravity may be of use. Now, when one drops a ball from a tower, that ball, although known to drop at a specific rate to the ground habitually, is void of *a priori* justification (Hume 1993, 15, 17, & 19-20.) One reason for this is that by not experiencing gravity itself, Hume believes that one could think of that ball as going up, sideways, or any other way conceivable, which would not defy the rules of analytic inference (Hume 1993, 18-20, 40-42, & 44-45.) As such, one may claim that gravity, as the cause of the ball falling to the Earth, is not itself an immutable or fixed cause, for one would be unable to envision gravity otherwise if any of its qualities were available to perception (Hume 1993, 18-20.)

However, because no one could observe gravity immediately, for it possesses no proximate perceptual qualities, helps to justify that gravity is a term which describes a cause that is uncertain (Hume 1993, 18-20.) Accordingly, Hume would assert that although the effects of gravity appear constant on Earth, it is not indubitably sure throughout the universe, since no mind is ever unfree to question the supposed analytic foundations of causation (Hume 1993, 18-20.) Hence, as a matter of fact, or something that bears some truth, only in the terrestrial realm, and only to humankind, Hume would assert that a cause like gravity is not authentically a cause and is instead a designation encompassing what appears to be in constant conjunction (Hume 1993, 18-20.)

Another problem concerning the so-called unquestionable occurrence of a supposed cause leading to what is interpretable as an effect, is that cause and effect are inseparable, negating the idea that causal relations unfold sequentially (Hume 1993, 21-25.) That is, if one regards a cause as necessarily preceding an effect, to be able to begin to understand how it relates to that effect, Hume would disagree (Hume 1993, 21-25.) One reason for his disagreement would be that reasoning about the appearance of an effect, could only come after the event of that effect (Hume 1993, 21-25.)

As such, one may claim that discursive thinking, as operating backward from an effect to a cause mismatches the progression of logical inference, for how could it be that a cause must precede an effect to be a cause, when coming to that discovery must first derive from tracing that effect back to it (Hume 1993, 21-25)?

To Hume, issues such as these, weakening the so-called unshakeable reality of cause and effect, assist in securing that once reason oversteps the bounds of sense, it starts to enter murky waters. In other words, when reason reaches for what it could never verify via perception, and as it starts to fancy ideas like an ultimate immaterial cause of existence, Hume would assert that it is in dangerous waters indeed; for one could always pose questions as to what caused that cause (Hume 1993, 37-39.) Accordingly, the problem of infinite regress Hume employs to help debase attempts to secure the reality of an overarching principle which led and unfolded as the cosmos (Hume 1993, 37-39.) For although one must assume that an answer exists, to pose a question and that the ability to investigate a topic would be impossible if there were nothing to discover, Hume would remind his readers that ideas speculating about what is beyond experience fail to be in the domain of philosophy (Hume 1993, 37-39.)

That is, Hume believes philosophy is the attempt to provide indubitable certainty regarding topics that could be justifiable in an utterly airtight fashion (Hume 1993, 37-39.) As such, since the surety of cause and effect is debatable, and because the belief in an original cause of the universe, or an immaterial God, could never be experientially verifiable, one may read Hume as one who believes nothing is sure (Hume 1993, 37-39.) Thus, since everything is a contingency, Hume believes it would be truer and perhaps more rewarding, if one were to analyze existence through the lens of probability and induction (Hume 1993, 37-39.)

3. HUMEAN CHALLENGES TO LEIBNIZIAN METAPHYSICS THROUGH JEOPARDIZING THE PRINCIPLE OF SUFFICIENT REASON

Thus far, this piece guided its readers through aspects of Leibnizian metaphysics with a focus on Leibniz's understanding and application of the principle of sufficient reason. Afterward, this article attempted to explicate Hume's critique of causality, and by doing so assists the reader in gathering his/her opinion of this matter, freely, without having only Leibnizian thought as an option. Now, this essay will assert why Leibniz's metaphysical account of reality is epistemically weak, under the scope of Hume, by poking holes in the logical foundations of the principle of sufficient reason. For without this cornerstone of Leibnizian thought, Leibniz's speculations regarding God, necessity, and contingency begin to fall apart.

Now, one objection Hume would pose to Leibniz's adherence to the principle of sufficient reason is that Leibniz mistakenly believes that causal relations are strictly *a priori* affairs (Leibniz 1989, 31.) That is, Hume points out that all effects must first be observable, and available to experience, for without initially encountering what could be attributable as an effect, no one would be able to infer that a cause caused it (Hume 1993, 37-39, Russell 1972, 659-674.) For example, if one were to discover, on an isolated island, a timepiece, that person would undoubtedly think that it came from a previous inhabitant of that island and that someone, at some time, designed and fashioned that watch (Hume 1993, 37-39, Russell 1972, 659-674.) Consequently, Hume would assert that if that person never saw that watch, that individual's train of thought, inferentially tracing that watch back to what would most likely be its designer, would never have a chance to occur (Hume 1993, 37-39, Russell 1972, 659-674.) Hence, unlike Leibniz, Hume would believe that not all effects are strictly products of relatable ideas, and rather since effects could be objects, something such as the principle of sufficient reason would be epistemically frail (Hume 1993, 37-39, Russell 1972, 659-674.) For how could an immaterial principle gives rise to physical existence, and how is it that one could indubitably reason about a material effect when its cause was ultimately an idea in the mind of its causer?

Another issue Hume would cast light on, to deflate Leibniz's principle of sufficient reason, is the fact that the principle of sufficient reason is not a necessary inference needed to investigate the natural order, and instead, it is a contingent assumption (Hume 1993, 37-39 Russell 1972, 659-674.) In other words, Hume finds that one could imagine the world otherwise than having to possess a cause to explain its existence (Hume 1993, 37-39, Russell 1972, 659-674.) One reason for this is that causality, does, in fact, derive from experience (Hume 1993, 37-39, Russell 1972, 659-674.) Now, because experience as available to people, who are those constructors and inventors of the concept of causality, can never prove that their trust in cause and effect is valid, assists in demonstrating that causality is not universally binding (Hume 1993, 37-39, Russell 1972, 659-674.) As such, a notion like the principle of sufficient reason, cannot surely and thoroughly be safe from critique, and since it is not exempt from revision, debate, and doubt helps Hume to secure that it is not necessary, or utterly unthinkable in any other fashion than what it is (Hume 1993, 37-39, Russell 1972, 659-674.)

Moreover, Hume would declare that Leibniz fails to recognize that cause and effect are inseparable for if an effect does not appear to be a product of something else, it could never be a genuine effect, which dissolves the principle of sufficient reason's claim that everything derives from a specific cause (Hume 1993, 57-60.) That is, if an effect is unanalyzable, it cannot be an effect, for its cause can only remain unknown. As such, terms like "cause" and "effect" more accurately depict a situation which occurs regularly but never in a way that applies the same to all other so-called causal relations (Hume 1993, 57-60.) For instance, if one finds a blank notebook, that person could never be sure if that notebook was in possession of someone who intended to use it for a class, as a diary, or as a business record. Accordingly, since no additional information is obtainable for one to pinpoint that notebook's cause, it is better to refrain from speculation. That is because there would be a variety of possible causes to choose from, to assign to that notebook, and never one that could be knowable as its precise cause (Hume 1993, 57-60.) Thus, since there exist many other explanations to things aside from the principle of sufficient reason, which ultimately leads back to God for Leibniz, Hume would believe the principle of sufficient reason is not as clear-cut as it should be (Hume 1993, 575-60.)

Now, one ramification that Hume's critique of causality and how he would handle the principle of sufficient reason would have on Leibnizian thought is that it would help to undercut Leibniz's view concerning the surety, or soundness and validity of believing in God (Leibniz 1989, 208-211.) One reason why Hume's challenges to causality would help to debase Leibniz's view of God is that to Hume, Leibniz's reasoning goes awry when he asserts that God is necessary and sufficient to explain reality and existence (Hume 1993, 37-39, 40-45, & 57-60.) First, Hume would claim that although Leibniz declares that God is an immaterial principle, who is necessary to existence, he fails to explain how a necessary cause can link to a contingency, like the natural order, which even he asserts could change (Hume 1993, 37-39, 40-45, & 57-60.) That is if God is immaterial, how is it that the Divine could create a reality unlike himself/herself, in which impermanence, finitude, and the power of the mind to question almost everything, appears (Hume 1993, 37-39, 40-45, & 57-60.)

Without this cornerstone of Leibnizian thought, Hume would claim that Leibniz's metaphysics falls apart for Leibniz himself confuses the nature of necessity and contingency on which his project relies. Moreover, if a necessary cause, like Leibniz's God, is, in fact, just an inductive claim than it follows that all of Leibniz's philosophy rests on a contingency, which could hold sway to some, but could never achieve the surety it wishes to expound. Next, because the principle of sufficient reason does not hold for all of reality, in a way anyone could confirm via the senses, shows that Leibniz is not relating ideas when he claims that Nature implies God for its cause, for God is not experienceable. Thus, because nature is physical and God, to Leibniz, immaterial, Hume asserts that there is no sufficient reason to assume an ultimate cause to life, for what is non-physical cannot produce a physical effect in a purely immaterial way. Lastly, without the principle of sufficient reason, being sure, the reader should refrain from adhering too fast to a belief like Leibniz's, for it lacks the indubitableness and clarity its author declares it possesses.

4. CONCLUSION

This essay commenced with an overview and introduction to Leibnizian thought regarding the principle of sufficient reason, as tied to causality, and Leibniz's metaphysical speculations about God and the natural order. Next, this article drew its readers to consider issues and problems arising from adhering to theories relying on causality, through challenges raised by David Hume. Lastly, this piece argued in favor of a Humean account of causality and attempted to display how Leibniz's principle of sufficient reason leads to chimeric metaphysical dogma, and not the concreteness of truth.

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