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Leibniz’s Motive Internalism

Shohei Edamura

0. Introduction

One of the most fundamental doctrines of Leibniz’s metaphysics is that strictly speaking only simple and immaterial substances (or monads) exist, and they only have perceptions and appetitions:

Indeed, considering the matter carefully, it may be said that there is nothing in the world except simple substances and, in them, perception and appetite. (G2 270 = L 537)

Human minds are simple substances, and they have reason and sensation (M 16, 26-9 = G6 609, 611). Reason gives clear and distinct perceptions, while sensations are taken as confused perceptions (NE 2.29.2 = G5 236). We may have clear and distinct perceptions about what we should do, whereas we have confused perceptions when we just desire something without understanding why it is good for us. It seems that distinct perceptions are tied with distinct appetitions or inclinations\(^{(1)}\) which will bring about successive perceptions,\(^{(2)}\) while confused perceptions are tied with confused inclinations:

…[T]here are confused inclinations which we attribute to the body, although there is always something corresponding in the mind; finally, there are distinct inclinations, which reason gives us, whose force and formation we feel... (NE 2.21.41 = Lan 201-2)

On the surface, the idea appears to be that clear and distinct perceptions which “reason gives us” are tied with appetitions or inclinations which are in conflict with confused inclinations. If distinct inclinations are strong enough to overcome irrational desires, the holders of distinct perceptions certainly have desires to achieve goods, which will end up with good actions.

In this paper, I aim for a critical account of Leibniz’s theory of thought and desire. I will argue that Leibniz is a motive internalist in a sense that he holds that if one understands that it is good to do X distinctly enough, he is always motivated by the understanding. In other words, he is not a motive externalist who denies any connection between understanding
and motivation. At the same time, I will argue that though Leibniz is considered as a motive internalist in the previous sense, he does not hold that an understanding always succeeds in motivating an agent and that an understanding alone can motivate an agent without any mediation of desire. In the first part of my paper, I will introduce three different formulations of the internalist theory. Leibniz will be considered as an internalist in some formulations, but will not in others. In the second, I will show that Leibniz accepts the weakness of will as Ezio Vailati argues. One important problem is that prima facie this seems to conflict with Leibniz’s doctrine that a person with a clear and distinct perception of good consequently will do a good action. In the third part, I will reconcile the weakness of will with this doctrine. I will claim that though Leibniz accepts the weakness of will he still holds that if one has a clear and distinct thought that it is good to do X, one is always motivated by the thought. In the fourth, I will further discuss how thoughts motivate agents in Leibniz’s framework. I will show that for Leibniz desires or appetitions are necessary for any motive of an agent, and the holders of clear and distinct thoughts have rational desires which are strong enough to overcome irrational ones.

1. Three Formulations of the Internalist Theory

Let us begin by introducing some possible formulations of the internalist theory in general, for this will prove helpful in understanding Leibniz’s view concerning the relationship between judgments and desires. The debate of motive internalism and externalism has a long history, and the concepts of internalism and externalism differ slightly in various contexts. So before examining whether Leibniz is an internalist, we should introduce some definition of internalism. In this paper, I will introduce three quite distinct and important formulations of motive internalism, which I think grasp important aspects of what matters in the debates of motive internalists and externalists.

A-Internalist Thesis: If an agent judges that it is better to do X rather than Y, then he is always motivated to do X rather than Y.

B-Internalist Thesis: If an agent judges that it is better to do X rather than Y, then it is possible that the judgment motivates him to do X rather than Y.

C-Internalist Thesis: If an agent judges that it is better to do X rather than Y, then that judgment can motivate him to do X rather than Y without any mediation of desire.
Clearly, B-Internalist Thesis (later on (B)) is weaker than A-Internalist Thesis (later on (A)). (A) entails (B), but not vice versa. (B) only claims that a judgment may motivate some agent for some time for some reason, and does not require that any judgment must motivate any agent. On the other hand, according to (A), a judgment must always succeed in motivating the agent. Now it seems that (A) is vulnerable to Humean objections. Human beings are not always motivated by their understandings. Furthermore, notable thinkers argue that even if one knows what his reason tells him to do, he may not follow it. Perhaps we can just see how many people have actually told lies though they know the Kantian principle that they should not. But (B) is not totally undermined by the fact that there are some people who have knowledge of moral laws and still are not motivated by them. If there are some people who are fully motivated by the knowledge of moral laws, it will be enough to establish the truth of (B).

C-Internalist Thesis (later on (C)) is also stronger than (B). (C) entails (B) but not vice versa. (B) only implies that in some case some agent can be fully motivated by his judgment. But it is possible that his motive always needs the mediation of desire that is connected to his judgment. According to (C), that possibility is not the case. (C) denies that desire is necessary for motivating an agent. So it may be more controversial whether we can ascribe (C) to Leibniz or not.

2. Vailati’s Interpretation of Leibniz’s Moral Psychology

Now it seems that Leibniz holds (B). Leibniz states that even though the understanding can determine the will, the act of the will is still contingent:

…I[t] consists in this, that we will that the strongest reasons or impressions which the understanding presents to the will do not prevent the act of the will from being contingent, and do not give it an absolute, and, so to speak, metaphysical necessity. And it is in this sense that I am accustomed to say that the understanding can determine the will, according to the prevalence of perceptions and reasons, in a manner which, even where it is certain and infallible, inclines without compelling. (NE 2.21.8 = Lan 180)

Leibniz claims that the understanding can determine the will. One may say that the passage
does not show that Leibniz holds (B), given that he is arguing that the understanding just “inclines” without compelling. But in the following passage, Leibniz explicitly states that the understanding may “compel” an agent:

One may be compelled also, by the consideration of a greater good, as when a man is tempted by proposing to him a too great advantage, although it is not customary to call this constraint. (NE 2.21.13 = Lan 184)

For Leibniz, even though a judgment may not always fully motivate an agent, still it is possible that a judgment concerning a greater good fully motivates an agent. Considering these discussions, we can conclude that Leibniz at least holds (B). But again, (A) is stronger than (B), and Leibniz may not hold (A) even if he holds (B). So we have to see whether Leibniz actually holds (A) or not. One problem is that Leibniz seems to accept the weakness of will in the *New Essays*. In relation to this problem, it is better to see Ezio Vailati’s interpretation. In his paper “Leibniz on Locke on Weakness of Will,” Vailati argues that Leibniz holds a modest version of internalism. According to Vailati, Leibniz holds (B), but not (A). For Vailati, Leibniz is not an extreme internalist in that he does not hold that a mere judgment always motivate a person in such a way that he always acts in accordance with her judgment of good. Some people do not act in accordance with their judgments even though they understand that they should do so. On the other hand, Leibniz is not an externalist in that he accepts some connection between judgment and motivation. Thus for Vailati, Leibniz is a “modest internalist.”

We shall see Vailati’s interpretation and textual evidence in detail. Vailati gives the following formulation as Leibniz’s view:

(P2’): If an agent judges that it would better to do X rather than Y and he is sensitive to the apparent good in X, then he wants to do X rather than Y. (Vailati, 1990, p. 219)

(P2’) requires the sensitivity to the apparent good. Without this sensitivity, an agent cannot be actually motivated by his judgment. A holder of (P2’) will hold (B), because, according to (P2’), if an agent is sensible enough to the apparent good, then he will be motivated by his judgement. But (P2’) does not entail (A) (indeed, it is inconsistent with (A)) given that (P2’)
suggests that an agent is not always motivated by his judgment. Now we have to see if Vailati’s has sufficient textual evidence. Indeed, Leibniz clearly accepts the weakness of will in the following passage:

…[W]e must not be astonished if in the struggle between the flesh and the spirit, the spirit so many times yields, since it does not clearly perceive its advantages… I knew a man influential in church and state, whose infirmities made him resolve to diet; but he admitted that he had not been able to resist the odor of the viands, which, passing before his apartment, were carried to others. It is doubtless a disgraceful weakness, but it is just what men have done. (NE 2.21.35 = Lan 192)

This example is enough to convince him of the existence of the weakness of will. Even a well-known prelate could not control his desire, and did not follow his judgment. Here Leibniz agrees with Locke who also accepts the weakness of will. For Locke, it is entirely possible that one’s will is too weak to follow the judgment. Thus Locke concludes that not all the people desire what they understand to be good (Essay 2.21.39). Desire isn't often determined by rational decisions; rather, it is determined by some psychological state with causal power, called “uneasiness,” which we cannot know and explain enough. Uneasiness accompanies with most of passions like aversion, fear, anger, envy and shame, and it forms our desire. By holding that we have insensible inclinations, Leibniz praises Locke when he introduces the concept of uneasiness.

Now we need to see that Leibniz talks about the sensitivity of soul about the good. Though Vailati does not point out, the following passage shows that a soul has to be sensible to the good for being motivated by judgments:

…[T]he most beautiful precepts of morality together with the best rules of prudence take effect only in a soul which is sensible (either directly, or, because that cannot always be, at least indirectly, as I shall show presently) and which is no longer sensible to that which is contrary thereto. (NE 2.21.31 = Lan 191)

Leibniz explicitly suggests that if a soul is not sensible, then it cannot be motivated by the good it perceives. Leibniz himself uses the term “sensible,” and it seems that the sensibility of
soul is a necessary condition of being motivated by evaluation. Also, the following passage introduced by Vailati shows that his formulation has a textual basis:

There is something beautiful and solid in these considerations. But I would not have you believe on that account that we must abandon those ancient axioms that the will follows the greatest good, or that it flies from the greatest evil that it perceives [qu’elle sent]. (NE 2.21.31 = Lan 190-1)

Even though Langley translated as “it perceives,” the original expression “elle sent” is closer to Vailati’s translation “it is sensitive.” Thus, this passage suggests that a soul has to be sensitive to the greatest good to be motivated by it.

So far we have seen that Vailati’s interpretation has good textual evidence. One might be tempted to conclude that since Leibniz admits the weakness of will, he must not have held any thesis stronger than (B). A judgment motivates an agent only if he is sensitive to the good. Maybe the majority of people are not sensitive enough to be motivated through their understanding.

3. Motivation and Sufficiently Distinct Understanding

However, in this paper I attempt to ascribe a thesis that is somewhat stronger than (B) to Leibniz. Vailati already argued that for Leibniz an agent is motivated by his judgment that he should do X insofar as he is sensitive to the apparent good of doing X. One problem is that Vailati does not provide explanations about the conditions of this sensitivity. When are agents sensitive enough to be motivated by their judgments? Perhaps Leibniz suggests that if we have been accustomed to follow our rational judgments, then we have good habits and we will be motivated by our rational judgments.

One may raise another question: Are good habits necessary for being motivated by rational judgments? Isn’t it possible to be motivated by a rational judgment without forming a good habit by spending a lot of time, given that an agent is rational and his judgment is distinct enough? A critical examination of the passages in the New Essays and other important works will provide us a clearer formulation of Leibniz’s view. In relation to this attempt, I will analyze (A) further. At least, the two following claims are to be distinguished:
A’ Internalist Thesis: If an agent judges that it is better to do X rather than Y, then he is always motivated to do X rather than Y, no matter how distinct his understanding is.

A’’ Internalist Thesis: If an agent understands that it is better to do X rather than Y by understanding the moral principles and how it is supported by them, then he is always motivated to do X rather than Y at that moment.

A’-Internalist thesis (or (A’)) is substantially the same as (A). According to (A’), an agent is always motivated by his judgment. Unlike (A’), (A’’) introduces some restriction on the motive force of judgment. A judgment fully motivates an agent with a certain condition: He must understand that X is better than Y deeply enough. In other words, he needs to understand the basic principles of morality (e.g., we need to choose a better action which produces more goods than others), and how the claim that X is better than Y is supported by the principles (i.e. why X will produce more goods than Y will). In Section 2, we have seen that Leibniz does not hold (A’). But still it may be possible to ascribe (A’’) to Leibniz. In relation to (A’’), we have to see Leibniz’s discussion of moral psychology and his analysis of soul in detail. Leibniz states that monads have only perceptions and appetitions (G2 270). The definitions of perception and appetite are given in the Monadology:

The passing state which enfolds and represents a multitude in unity or in the simple substance is merely what is called perception. (L 644 = M 14)
The action of the internal principle which brings about change or the passage from one perception to another can be called appetite. It is true that appetite need not always fully attain the whole perception to which it tends, but it always attains some of it and reaches new perceptions. (L 644 = M 15)

Leibniz’s concept of perception is different from that of many philosophers. Not all perceptions are conscious. Human minds have many unconscious perceptions, which are some representational states that correspond to the external things. When we sleep deeply, we may only have unconscious perceptions (M 24 = G6 611). But we do not have to consider that type of perception now. For a human agent, a perception is a mental state, and an appetite or appetite is a tendency to bring about a certain kind of new perceptions. Now Leibniz explicitly states that appetites “arise from” representations or perceptions:
But the author thinks that that very vanity, that stubbornness, those other wild intentions of persons who otherwise seem to have quite good sense, cannot be explained by the appetites that arise from the representation of good and evil, and that they compel us to have recourse to that transcendent power which transforms good into evil, and evil into good, and the indifferent into good or into evil. (G6 429 = Huggard 435-6)

The term “representation” is a synonym of perception here. Both terms refer to a state of simple substance that expresses something else. New appetitions are somehow caused or produced through perceptions of apparent goods or evils.

Also, Leibniz introduces the concept of “distinct inclination,” which comes from our reason:

…[F]inally, there are distinct inclinations, which reason gives us, whose force and formation we feel; and the pleasures of this kind which are found in the knowledge and production of order and harmony are the most estimable. (NE 2.21.41 = Lan 201-2)

Though Leibniz does not use the term “appetite” or “appetition” here, we can identify “inclination” with “appetition” in this context. Leibniz clearly distinguishes distinct and confused inclinations, and distinct inclinations are produced through reasoning. It seems that distinct inclinations or appetitions come from distinct perceptions, while confused inclinations are from confused perception.

Now I will show that according to Leibniz one's understanding of the basic moral principles and their relationship to one's judgment produce a distinct inclination strong enough to overcome confused inclinations, which implies that Leibniz committed (A’’). Leibniz argues that some cognitions are surd (in other words, all the components are not intuitively conceived at once), and the inclinations coming from these cognitions are weak:

But I would not have you believe on that account that we must abandon those ancient axioms that the will follows the greatest good, or that it flies from the greatest evil that it perceives. The source of the little application to true goods arises mainly from the
fact that in matters and on the occasions where the senses act but little, the greater part of our thoughts are, so to speak, surd (I call them cogitationes caecae in Latin) i.e. void of perception and feeling, and consisting in the wholly empty employment of characters, as happens in the case of those who make algebraic calculations without considering from time to time that the geometrical figures in question and the words originally produce the same effect in this regard as the characters of arithmetic or algebra. One often reasons in words without having quite the same object in mind. (NE 2.21.31 = Lan 190-1)

In many cases, our cognition remains in the level of surd cognition. For example, we may differentiate the function \((f(x) + xg(x))\) as \((f'(x) + g(x) + xg'(x))\) without being conscious of the contents of \(f(x)\) and \(g(x)\). In that case, we do not have complete intuitive knowledge of the function \((f'(x) + g(x) + xg'(x))\). Just like that, we often do not have intuitive knowledge of all the components when we make a judgment. For example, one may judge that he should help an injured person in front of him without being conscious of the basic principle that we need to do good things and how the action of helping produces goods. When we do not consciously and comprehensively grasp all the components in the reasoning, the judgment is not vividly realized. Thus Leibniz states that surd thoughts are too weak to move minds.

Thus a short distance of time robs us entirely of the future, as if the object had entirely disappeared. There often remains only the name in the mind and that kind of thoughts of which I have already spoken, which are surd, and incapable of making an impression, unless you have attended to them methodologically and habitually. (NE 2.21.62 = Lan 210)

Leibniz implies that surd cognitions are incapable of impressing on our minds. So it is reasonable to conclude that surd cognitions may be too weak to motivate an agent completely. If surd cognitions cannot fully motivate agents, then agents with surd cognitions may be driven by irrational desires. Thus, if one seeks for a way for being motivated rationally, it seems that we need cognitions which are more distinct than surd ones.

We need textual evidence that shows how strong these distinct inclinations are. Leibniz argues that we can stop our desire with contrary inclinations coming from our understanding:
But when desire is strong enough in itself to move, if nothing prevents it, it can be stopped by contrary inclinations; whether they consist in a simple propensity which is as it were the element or beginning of desire, or go as far as desire itself…. Now being once in a condition to stop the effect of our desires and passions, i.e. to suspend (their) action, we can find means to combat them, whether by contrary desires or inclinations or by diversion, i.e. by occupations of another nature. (NE 2.21.47 = Lan 202-3)

This at least suggests that desires coming from our understanding are strong enough to suspend the power of passion or desire, which comes from confused perceptions. But of course, this may not be sufficient to lead our will to the direction of what our reason tells.

In the *Theodicy*, we have better evidence for ascribing (A”) to Leibniz. He claims that “the wise mind” always acts in accordance with the principles that he knows:

One should rather maintain that the wise mind tends towards all good, as good, in proportion to his knowledge and his power, but that he only produces the best that can be achieved. (G6 285 = T 282 = Huggard 303)

The wise mind always acts according to principles, always according to rules, and never according to exceptions, save when the rules come into collision through opposing tendencies, where the strongest carries the day: or else, either they will stop one another or some third course will emerge as a result. (G6 315 = T 337 = Huggard 331–2)

To be sure, the latter passage suggests that two principles may conflict with each other, and therefore even the wise mind may not act in accordance with one of these principles. But we should note that the wise mind consciously and clearly understands both principles. The decision is always made with intellectual consideration. Certainly, he is motivated through his own judgment, not by passion or others.

Also, Leibniz suggests that we are not motivated by our judgment only if our judgment becomes dim with other apparent goods:

It is an imperfection in our freedom that makes us capable of choosing evil instead of
good, a greater evil instead of the lesser evil, the lesser good instead of the greater good. That arises from the appearances of good and evil, which deceive us… (G6 306 = T 319 = Huggard 322)

Now it is natural to suppose that “the appearances of good and evil” deceive us because our understanding is not sufficiently distinct. If so, it is necessary to have a sufficiently distinct understanding for avoiding the appearances of good and evil.

The previous passage, however, does not logically imply that if our understanding is distinct enough so that we understand the basic moral principles and how the judgment that we should do X is logically supported by these principles, we will have distinct and strong inclinations which will not be overthrown by other inclinations coming from the apparent goods. But Leibniz also states that “[o]ne must admit that there is always within us enough power over our will, but we do not always bethink ourselves of employing it” (G6 309 = T 327 = Huggard 326). This implies that if we attentively make use of our power to control the will, then the will follow our judgment. This passage fits with Leibniz’s doctrine of surd cognition. As far as our cognition is surd, the inclination coming from this cognition may not be strong enough to motivate us. But once we get attentive enough and our cognition gets clearer, we will exercise the power to control our will.

In conclusion, Leibniz seems to hold the view that a distinct inclination that emerges from an intuitive cognition is strong enough to overcome confused inclinations.

4. Desire as Requirement of Motivation

So far I have argued that Leibniz holds (A’”), which is stronger than (B) but weaker than (A’). Not all judgments succeed in motivating agents. However, as far as the understanding of an agent is distinct enough, his judgment certainly motivates him. But we have not discussed Leibniz’s moral psychology in relation to C-Internalist Thesis stated as the following:

(C): If an agent judges that it would better to do X rather than Y, then that judgment can motivate him to do X rather than Y without any mediation of desire.

Now whether Leibniz holds (C) or not depends upon his concept of “desire.” We can see Leibniz’s concept of desire from the following passage:
This desire is a kind of an inclination of will (velleité) as compared with a complete volition. We should will, for example, if there were no greater evil to be feared, if we obtained what we wish, or if perhaps there were a greater good to be hoped for if we went forward. But we can say that man wills to be delivered from the gout with a certain degree of volition, but which does not always go on to the last effort. (NE 2.21.30 = Lan 188)

For Leibniz, whenever I make a final decision and act in accordance with it, I am supposed to have a complete volition. But this complete volition is in fact composed of many appetitions or desires of which I may not be conscious. Thus many appetitions or desires that are often unconscious are ontologically prior to this complete volition, which is considered as a result of these appetitions. They concur and the aggregation of all appetitions makes up the complete volition. So it seems that Leibniz holds the view that a judgment needs a desire to motivate an agent. Leibniz also denies that a mind has some “direct” power to stop desires:

All this is very much to my taste, and shows that the mind has not entire and direct power always to stop its desires, else it would never be determined, whatever examination it might make, and whatever good reasons or efficacious sentiments it might have, and it would always remain irresolute and fluctuate eternally between fear and hope. (NE 2.21.48 = Lan 204)

The human mind does not always succeed in controlling desires. For Leibniz, a complete volition is always composed of many appetitions or desires. So without other desires, the human mind cannot change his volition that results in another action. Leibniz understands that the mechanism of desires is analogous to the mechanic, and only desires can resist against other desires just as only forces can cancel out other forces. Of course, we should not take this passage as stating that the appetition coming from our reason or distinct perception cannot overcome other desires. It merely suggests that our reason always needs an appetition or inclination to motivate us. Given that a distinct inclination is strong enough to overcome confused ones, with a mediation of this distinct inclination, human reason can certainly motivate an agent.
Conflicts of many appetitions also explain why an agent is sometimes not fully motivated by his judgment. In that case, the appetition that comes from a judgment is not strong enough to overcome other appetitions. On the other hand, if the appetition coming from a judgment is powerful enough, then it will overcome other inclinations and thus motivate an agent. The conflict of inclinations that Leibniz introduces is similar to that which is introduced in Plato’s analogy (Phaedrus 246a–b). Plato talks about a pair of winged horses and a charioteer in Phaedrus. One of the winged horses is noble and of noble breed, and the other is ignoble and of ignoble breed. The charioteer is associated with the rational part of a soul; the noble horse with the spiritual part, which always obeys the rational part; and the ignoble with the appetitive part. But the noble also can be analogical to the appetition tied to a distinct perception in Leibniz, while the ignoble is like the appetition tied to a confused perception. Given this analogy, it makes sense to say that if the noble horse is powerful enough, then even the ignoble horse will be always pulled by the noble. Insofar as Leibniz holds that any appetition tied to a confused perception is not strong enough to overcome an appetition tied to a truly distinct perception, he is supposed to hold (A’”) though for Leibniz our reason certainly needs the distinct inclination or appetition to overcome confused appetitions. Without distinct inclinations we will not be motivated by our judgment no matter how our understanding of this judgment is clear and distinct.

Notes
(1) Leibniz uses the expression “inclinations or appetitions” (G4 550), which suggests that “inclination” and “appetition” are synonyms.
(2) Leibniz states that appetite is “the striving from one perception to another” (G3 576 = L 663). Also, in the Principles of Nature and Grace Based on Reason, Leibniz claims that appetitions are “tendencies from one perception to another” (G6 598 = L 636). Appetites or appetitions are supposed to bring about new perceptual states.
(3) Considering Humean objections, Christine Korsgaard argues that an internalist theory actually does not require that practical reason always succeeds in motivating people so that they act in accordance with the results which it tells to them (Korsgaard, 1986, p. 15).
(4) For example, Leibniz uses the expression “the perception or the representation” in a letter to Hartsoeker (G3 509). That occurs in some other passages, too (G4 531, G7 556). Also, in a letter to Arnauld, Leibniz uses “expression,” “representation” and “perception” as synonyms (G2 113-4).
(5) Again, Leibniz uses the expression “inclinations or appetitions” (G4 550). In another text, Leibniz defines inclination as “an faculty of acting [facultas agendi]” (Grua 513).

Abbreviation


References
