

Leibniz on Habit in the *New Essays*

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An intensive discussion of the relationship between desire and perception is prominent in Locke's *Essay* and Leibniz's *New Essays*. In one of the most voluminous chapters in the *Essay*, Locke suggests that our perception of good does not always fully motivate us given that a will is sometimes weak and cannot thoroughly follow the guidance of the perception of good. Leibniz also claims in his *New Essays* that "in the struggle between flesh and spirit, spirit so often loses" (NE 2.21.35 = RB 186). In other words, Leibniz endorses the weakness of will and the view that even if an agent judges that one should do something, she may not be motivated accordingly. Given that Leibniz accepts the weakness of will, Ezio Vailati takes Leibniz's position to be "a form of modest internalism." According to Vailati, Leibniz holds that an agent is motivated by a judgment when she is sensitive enough to it.

I think further analysis is needed to understand Leibniz's position. Endorsing Vailati's statement, first I argue that for Leibniz an agent is sensitive enough for the good which her perception represents if her perception is sufficiently distinct. In that case, she understands the basic moral principles and how the judgment is supported by them. My discussion begins with Vailati's internalist account of Leibniz's moral psychology, as well as with his requirement of sensitivity for motivation. An examination of the *New Essays* shows that Vailati has good evidence for his interpretation. However, I argue in the second section of my paper that on a more careful consideration the relevant texts support the claim that an agent is motivated by her perception of good when the inclination corresponding to the perception of good overcomes confused inclinations. In the final section, I argue that an agent can also be motivated even when her perception of good is not distinct enough. Leibniz suggests that as far as an agent has a good habit of following previous volitions or decisions, then she will be motivated by them even though her perception is not distinct. I conclude by claiming that these two sufficient conditions for motivation are both explained by the general claim that an agent is motivated by her perception of good when the inclination corresponding to the perception of good, together with cooperating inclinations, overcomes opposing confused inclinations.

1. Vailati's Interpretation and Sensitivity to Good

In his paper "Leibniz on Locke on Weakness of Will," Vailati argues that just like Locke Leibniz accepts that the will of an agent is sometimes so weak that it does not follow her perception of good. Indeed, Leibniz addresses a story of a well-known prelate introduced in Locke's essay, and agrees that it suggests that wills are sometimes so weak. Leibniz also notes in the Book 2 Section 21 of the *New Essays* that a perception of good cannot move an agent by itself, and thus it needs a correspondent desire to motivate her, as Locke already suggests. For Locke, an

agent may not have a desire to do an action even when she perceives the good of that action, and she is not motivated to do so. So Locke holds that a desire is necessary for motivation. Leibniz also accepts that a desire is necessary for motivation by claiming that “the mind has not entire and direct power always to stop its desires” (NE 2.21.48). Leibniz insists that the mind can “itself oppose only indirectly its desires,” in other words, by the mediation of other desires (NE 2.21.48). Leibniz talks about inclinations or appetites of minds that have some causal powers to bring about new mental states. Leibniz uses the expression “inclinations or appetitions” (G4 550), which suggests that “inclination” and “appetition” are synonyms. As well-known, all simple substances or monads (not only human minds) have perceptions and appetitions, and appetitions are tendencies to produce new states for them.

However, as Vailati notes, all of these do not establish that Leibniz is not a motive internalist. It is possible that Leibniz holds some connection between perceptions of good and motivation. According to Vailati, Leibniz’s view is “internalist because it maintains the existence of an essential connection between evaluation and motivation, but it is moderate because such connection is conditional upon the presence of an adequate amount of sensitivity to relevant evaluative judgment.” Thus, Leibniz’s view should not be characterized as a bare externalism which denies any essential connection between evaluation and motivation. It is clear that Vailati suggests an adequate amount of sensitivity to evaluation is necessary for motivation, which is not introduced in Locke’s essay. After all, Locke is agnostic about an essential connection between evaluation and motivation. For Locke, desire is necessary for motivation, but what kind of desire emerges from evaluation is an open question. As for Leibniz, he certainly uses the term “sensible” when he talks about motivation, by writing that “the finest moral precepts and the best prudential rules in the world have weight only in a soul which is as sensitive to them as to what opposes them – if not directly sensitive (which is not always possible), then at least indirectly sensitive, as I shall explain shortly” (NE 2.21.35 = RB 186). Moreover, Leibniz uses the expression “sense” in the following passage:

There is merit and substance in these thoughts. However, I would not want them to encourage people to believe they should give up the old axioms that the will pursues the greatest good, and flees the greatest evil, of which it is sensible. (NE 2.21.35 = RB 185)

The expression “which it is sensible” suggests that a soul senses the greatest good and evil, and to that extent it is sensitive to a good or evil. Thus Vailati seems to have a textual evidence for claiming that for Leibniz an agent is motivated by her perception of good when she is sensitive to the good.

One problem is that the condition of having sensitivity is not clear. How can we be sensitive enough to the good? What kind of perception do we have when we are sensitive? It is better to explain the condition of being sensitive on the basis of the passages in the *New Essays*. Immediately after claiming that an agent is motivated by her perception of good if she is sensitive to the good, Leibniz suggests that she is sensitive to the good when her perception is distinct. If her perception is distinct, she has a strong inclination to follow her perception, and thus

motivated. Another problem is that Vailati seems to suggest that the sensitivity to a good is a necessary condition for a motivation. A careful examination of the *New Essay* shows that even when the good is not vividly presented and sensed by an agent, she can still be motivated if she has a habit of following her perception of good. It seems that Leibniz introduces two *sufficient* conditions for motivation: First, an agent is motivated if she has a distinct perception of good since that perception is tied with an inclination that is strong enough to overcome other inclinations. Second, an agent is motivated when she has a good habit of following her evaluation, and as a result she is sensitive enough to the good which her evaluation presents. To sum up these conditions, I will first introduce the most general principle of motivation in Leibniz. For Leibniz, Volition results from a composition of many inclinations. When an inclination coming from a perception of good, together with concurring inclinations which result from the good habit of an agent, overcomes opposing inclinations, the agent is motivated.

2. The Doctrine of Distinct Inclination

A problem of Vailati's reading is that he does not consider the context in which the condition of sensitivity is introduced in the *New Essays*. Indeed, we find an insistence on the fact that an agent is sensitive to the good iff her perception of good is distinct:

... I would not want them to encourage people to believe they should give up the old axioms that the will pursues the greatest good, and flees the greatest evil, of which it is sensible. The neglect of things that are truly good arises largely from the fact that, on topics and in circumstances where our senses are not much engaged, our thoughts are for the most part what we might call 'blind' – in Latin I call them *cogitationes caecae*. (NE 2.21.35 = RB 185)

In this text, Leibniz is concerned to insist on the fact that we are not sensible to the good when our thoughts are "blind." Later, Leibniz suggests that thoughts are blind iff they are confused. When thoughts are blind, "they are empty of perception and sensibility, and consist in the wholly unaided use of symbols, as happens with those who calculate algebraically with only intermittent attention to the geometrical figures which are being dealt with" (NE 2.21.35 = RB 185-6). Thus, we just have perceptions of symbols or words without paying attention to the content which these symbols represent.

Confused thoughts often make themselves vividly sensed, whereas distinct ones are usually only potentially vivid: they could be actually so, if we would only apply ourselves to getting through to the senses of the words or symbols; but since we do not do that, through lack of care or lack of time, what we oppose lively sentiments with are bare words or at best images which are too faint. (NE 2.21.35 = RB 186-7)

Basically Leibniz suggests that when we are merely attentive to words or symbols, they are faintly perceived by us, and we are not so sensitive to what is represented by them. On the other hand, when we are attentive not only to the symbols but the contents represented by them, then our perceptions are distinct, and the contents are vividly perceived and thus we are sensitive enough to them.

Now Leibniz notes that a distinct perception brings a distinct inclination, while a confused perception brings a confused inclination:

So there are insensible inclinations of which we are not aware. There are sensible ones: we are acquainted with their existence and their objects, but have no sense of how they are constituted; these are confused inclinations which we attribute to our bodies although there is always something corresponding to them in the mind. Finally there are distinct inclinations which reason gives us: we have a sense both of their strength and of their constitution. (NE 2.21.41 = RB 194)

As far as the perception of good is distinct, the distinct inclination coming from this perception is strong, and thus motivates the agent. In that case, the agent is considered to be sensitive to the good.

Now an important point is that Leibniz does not explicitly claim that the sensitivity is absolutely necessary for motivation. He just suggests that an agent is motivated when she is sensitive to the good which her perception presents. In the following section, we see how Leibniz introduces another case in which an agent is motivated.

3. Habit and Volition

In Leibniz, there is a direct route to the conclusion that an agent is motivated when some inclination overcomes the opposing inclinations. It is a basic principle for him that a motivation consists in a composition of inclinations, just as how a body moves is determined by the mechanic.

Since the final result is determined by how things weigh against one another, I should think it could happen that the most pressing disquiet did not prevail; for even if it prevailed over each of the contrary endeavours taken singly, it may be outweighed by all of them taken together. The mind can even avail itself of the trick of ‘dichotomies’, to make first one prevail and then another; just as in a meeting one can ensure that one faction prevails by getting a majority of votes, through the order in which one puts the questions to the vote. The mind should make provision for this from a distance, for once battle has been engaged there is no time left to make use of such artifices: everything which then impinges on us weighs in the balance and contributes to determining a resultant direction, almost as in mechanics; so that without some prompt diversion we will be unable to stop it. (NE 2.21.40 = RB 193)

When one inclination is stronger than opposing ones, there is a sufficient reason for an agent to be motivated by the

stronger inclinations. A composition of inclinations is also called a complete volition in the following:

Various perceptions and inclinations combine to produce a complete volition: it is the result of the conflict amongst them. There are some, imperceptible in themselves, which add up to a disquiet which impels us without our seeing why... The eventual result of all these impulses is the prevailing effort, which makes a full volition. However, desires and endeavours of which we are aware are often called ‘volition’ too, though less complete ones, whether or not they prevail and take effect. (NE 2.21.39 = RB 192)

So, a complete volition can always be analyzed into many inclinations that compose it. If we want to make a decision and act reasonably, we need to have strong inclinations to support a reasonable volition.

Indeed, Leibniz provides an explanation of how we can control inclinations that oppose to our perception of good. Leibniz suggests that in some cases we have strong desires which oppose to our rational decisions. We can think about two possible ways to increase the strength of inclination. First, we can enhance the inclination that corresponds to the perception of good. Second, we can add another inclination that cooperates with the inclination corresponding to the perception of good.

Leibniz clearly and explicitly suggests that a plurality of inclinations can cooperate to motivate an agent. See an example of cooperation. If we have had a habit of following a previous rational decision, then we have another inclination, which is different from the inclination that comes from the rational decision itself, and yet cooperates with it. Even if the inclination coming from the rational decision itself is too weak to overcome the opposing inclination, it still can overcome the opposing inclination with the aid of another inclination. In the *New Essays*, there are some passages which explicitly discuss the relationship between habits and inclinations. First, the following passage suggests that there are two ways to act in accordance with rational conclusions:

Finally, we need to be firmly and steadily resolved to act on our conclusions; and we need skills, methods, rules of thumb, and well-entrenched habits to make us true to our resolve later on, when the considerations which led us to it are no longer present to our minds. (NE 2.21.67 = RB 207)

Here Leibniz suggests that firm resolutions will help us to act in accordance with conclusions. But in addition to that, Leibniz also suggests that “well-entrenched habits” will help us to be motivated rationally, even if the rational considerations are not vividly presented to us. Two cases are also suggested here:

So it is all a matter of ‘Think about it carefully’ and ‘Remember’ – by the first to make, laws, and by the second to follow them even when we do not remember the reasons from which they sprang. (NE 2.21.36 = RB 189)

First, when one thinks about it carefully she can make her perceptions more distinct. Since distinct perceptions will motivate her, she will be motivated. Second, when she remembers that she should follow her previous rational decisions, then she will be motivated by these even if she doesn't have distinct perceptions. Lastly, the following passage presents two ways of motivation explicitly.

Still, despite all these individual differences, it remains true that everyone acts only according to his present perceptions: when the future affects someone, it does so either through his image of it or else through his having made a policy and practice of being guided by the mere natural sign of it. The latter case depends on the fact that one cannot go against a policy one has firmly adopted – still less against one's established practice – without a certain disquiet and sometimes a certain feeling of distress. (NE 2.21.64 = RB 204)

First, Leibniz suggests a representation of a future affects a mind. Second, even if the representation of the future is tenuous, a mind can still be motivated when it has an established practice.

As for habits, the following passages also suggest that a “practice of standing by whatever is found to be best” will help one to act rationally even when the good is not sensibly presented to her:

That is why reason opposes appetite with images of greater goods or evils to come, and with a firm policy and practice of thinking before acting and then standing by whatever is found to be best, even when the sensible grounds which lead to it are no longer present to the mind, and consist in little but faint images or even in the ‘blind thoughts’ which are generated by words or signs which have no concrete interpretation. (NE 2.21.36 = RB 189)

Often nothing remains of it in the mind but the name, together with thoughts of a kind I have already mentioned – ‘blind’ thoughts which cannot influence anyone unless he has made provision for them through being methodical and through practice. (NE 2.21.63 = RB 202)

As far as we have a good practice of following what reason tells to be the best, then even when we forget about how reason justifies the conclusion, we can be motivated by the judgment.

Also, the next passage suggests that in some cases an agent is motivated by her judgment even when she does not have a distinct perception of good:

Since we cannot always analyze the notions of true good and true evil to the point where we can see the pleasures and pains which they involve, so as to be influenced by them, we must make this rule for ourselves once and for all: wait till you have the findings of reason and from then on follow them, even if

they are ordinarily retained only as ‘blind thoughts’ devoid of sensible charms. We need this rule so as finally to gain control both of our passions and of our insensible inclinations, or disquiets, by acquiring that custom of acting in conformity with reason which makes virtue a pleasure and second nature to us. But it is not my purpose here to offer and instill moral precepts, or spiritual procedures and skills for the practice of true piety. (NE 2.21.35 = RB 187-8)

In this case, an agent clearly lacks a distinct notion of good, and as a result the good is not vividly presented to her. But even blind thoughts eventually motivate an agent here, “by acquiring custom.”

The following passage also discusses a custom or habit, and suggests that a habit itself causes some inclination to motivate an agent:

And I believe that virtue would have infinitely more effect, accompanied as it is by so many substantial benefits, if some happy transformation in human kind brought it as last into favour – made it fashionable, so to speak. It is quite certain that young people could be made accustomed to getting their greatest pleasure from the exercise of virtue. And even grown men could make laws for themselves and make a practice of following them, so that they would be powerfully disposed to them, and as prone to disquiet when deflected from them as a drunkard is when prevented from going to the tavern. (NE 2.21.38 = RB 191)

It says that if one have a habit to follow some rule, then it will bring about some “disquiet” that makes her uncomfortable when she violates the rule. This disquiet is nothing but an inclination to motivate her in accordance with the rule.

Hence what is required is that the mind be prepared in advance, and be already stepping from thought to thought, so that it will not be too much held up when the path becomes slippery and treacherous. It helps with this if one accustoms oneself in general to touching on certain topics only in passing, the better to preserve one’s freedom of mind. Best of all, we should become accustomed to proceeding methodically and sticking to sequences of thoughts for which reason, rather than chance (i.e. insensible and fortuitous impressions), provides the thread. (NE 2.21.47 = RB 195-6)

This passage suggests that a “preparation” will result in some inclination to motivate an agent following a rational perception. In other words, as far as we are “accustomed” to follow a rational perception, then we will be motivated accordingly.

In brief, even though Leibniz does not always use the term “habit,” he constantly supports the view that an agent can be motivated even if she does not have a distinct perception of good. Through a habit, custom or practice,

she may be able to follow the result of a rational consideration even if the chain of reasonings does not appear to her.

4. Conclusion

So, contrary to Vailati, I think the perception of good and the sensitivity of an agent are sufficient, but not necessary for motivation. Even if an agent is not sensitive enough to the good presented by her perception, still she can be motivated if another inclination joins the distinct inclination. Yet, in agreement with Vailati, I claim that for Leibniz an agent is certainly motivated when she is sensitive to the good, for the sensitivity makes her inclination strong enough to overcome opposing inclinations. In spite of the impression given by the term “sensible,” the sensitivity of an agent to the good is contingent upon how distinct she perceives the good. Still, this is not the only case in which an agent is motivated. While Leibniz argues that a perception of good always involves a tendency or inclination to motivate an agent, there can be some other inclinations that join this inclination. When a perception of good is not distinct, the inclination coming from the very perception is not strong. But if the agent has a habit of following what her perception of good tells, she has a concurring inclination that motivates her together with the inclination coming from the perception of good.

Abbreviations

G = *Die philosophischen Schriften von G. W. Leibniz*, 7 vols., edited by C. I. Gerhardt. Berlin, 1875-1890. Cited by volume and page.

NE = *Nouveaux Essais*. Cited by book, chapter and section.

RB = *New Essays on Human Understanding*, translated by Peter Remnant and Jonathan Bennett. 2nd edition. New York: Cambridge University Press, 1996.

Reference

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