

Perfection, Power and the Passions in Spinoza and Leibniz

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I

In a short piece written most likely in the 1690s and given the title by Loemker of “On Wisdom,” Leibniz says the following: “...we see that happiness, pleasure, love, perfection, being, power, freedom, harmony, order, and beauty are all tied to each other, a truth which is rightly perceived by few.”¹ Why is this? That is, why or how are these concepts tied to each other? And, why have so few understood this relation? Historians of philosophy are familiar with the fact that both Spinoza and Leibniz place strong emphasis on the notion of power in giving their accounts of the human passions. But, while many scholars have explicated the relation between power and the passions (especially in Spinoza’s philosophy), there has been considerably less attention given to the nature of perfection and its relation to both power and the passions.²

Consider the following passages from Spinoza and Leibniz in which these two thinkers seem to bring together the issue of perfection and passion. In *Ethics* IIIp11s, Spinoza says the following:

We see, then, that the Mind can undergo great changes, and pass now to a greater, now to a lesser perfection. These passions, indeed, explain to us the affects of Joy and Sadness. By Joy, therefore, I shall understand in what follows that *passion by which the Mind passes to a greater perfection*. And by Sadness, that *passion by which it passes to a lesser perfection*. The affect of Joy which is related to the Mind and Body at once I call *Pleasure or Cheerfulness*, and that of Sadness, *Pain or Melancholy*.³

And, in the *Monadology* §49, Leibniz says this: “The creature is said to *act* externally insofar as it is perfect, and to *be acted upon* [*patir*] by another, insofar as it is imperfect.”⁴

In other words, for Spinoza, the primitive passions of joy and sadness are cases in which a being’s perfection is increasing or decreasing, while, for Leibniz, *any* passion, it would

¹ GP VII 87/L 426. The following abbreviations will be used in giving citations: **A** = Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz, *Sämliche Schriften und Briefe*, ed. Berlin-Brandenburgischen Akademie der Wissenschaften (Darmstadt and Berlin, 1923-), followed by series, volume, and page number; **AG** = G. W. Leibniz *Philosophical Essays*, edited and translated by Roger Ariew and Daniel Garber (Indianapolis, 1989); **CWS** = *The Collected Works of Spinoza*, edited and translated by Edwin Curley (Princeton, 1985), vol. I; **G** = *Spinoza Opera*, edited by Carl Gebhardt (Heidelberg, 1925), followed by volume and page number; **GLW** = *Briefwechsel zwischen Leibniz und Christian Wolff*, edited by C.I. Gerhardt (Halle, 1860); **GP** = *Die philosophischen Schriften von G. W. Leibniz*, edited by C. I. Gerhardt (Berlin, 1875-90; reprint. Hildesheim, 1965), followed by volume and page number; **Grua** = G. W. Leibniz, *Textes Inédits d’après les manuscrits de la bibliothèque provinciale de Hanovre*, ed. Gaston Grua (Paris, 1948), followed by volume and page number; **L** = Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz, *Philosophical Papers and Letters*, edited and translated by Leroy E. Loemker (2nd edition, Dordrecht, 1969). On the rare occasions when I deviate from the translations, I shall indicate this by an asterisk “*” after the citation.

² Jerome Schneewind, in *The Invention of Autonomy: A History of Modern Moral Philosophy* ((Cambridge, 1998), chs. 11-12), does discuss the concept of perfection in detail, but he ultimately addresses different issues than those I wish to discuss here.

³ G II 148-9/CWS 500-01.

⁴ GP VI 615/AG 219.

seem, is a case in which a being's perfection is diminished. Now this is not exactly correct: Leibniz is describing the perfection or imperfection of finite beings in relation to each other. So, for Leibniz, a being can be said to *act* over another when it is more perfect than another, and one being can be said to *suffer* from another when it is less perfect than the other. The *passion* that Leibniz describes is not of the same kind that Spinoza is describing, for it is not concerned with the internal state of any one being. Nevertheless, what is interesting in these passages is their reference to perfection in defining the nature of passions, or *the* passions.

The concept of perfection in the thought of Spinoza and Leibniz is also of great interest when we turn from the individual to the world. While some individuals may be said to increase in perfection over time, can the world be said to do so? Can the world become ever more perfect? If there is a direct correspondence between power and perfection, if force is equivalent to power, and if the quantity of force in the universe must remain constant, it would seem that the world's perfection must remain constant. But perhaps there is some wiggle-room for Spinoza or Leibniz on this score. Returning to the level of the individual, do Leibniz and Spinoza allow for a world of universal salvation or universal blessedness? Or is it the case that for every increase in perfection in some individuals towards blessedness and eternal happiness, there must necessarily be a corresponding decrease in perfection in other individuals?

II

In *Ethics* IId6, Spinoza equates reality and perfection: something is said to have a greater degree of perfection when it is more real. While this is a standard way of speaking at the time, this definition of perfection alone is not very illuminating. To arrive at a more helpful understanding of the relation between perfection and passions, we have to approach the matter from the direction of the passions. Spinoza concludes Part III of the *Ethics* with the following "General Definition of the Affects" that does *not* include a reference to perfection and imperfection but to the clarity of our ideas. He says,

An Affect that is called a Passion of the mind is a confused idea, by which the Mind affirms of its Body, or of some part of it, a greater or lesser force of existing than before, which, when it is given, determines the Mind to think of this rather than that.

And in the Explanation, he continues,

But it should be noted that, when I say *a greater or lesser force of existing than before*, I do not understand that the Mind compares its Body's present constitution with a past constitution, but that the idea which constitutes the form of the affect affirms of the body something which really involves more or less of reality than before.⁵

⁵ G II 203-4/CWS 542.

Here we have the concept of power and reality added to the explanation of the nature of the passions. Insofar as there is the equation of reality and perfection, we might say that something is more perfect when its power is increased. Further, we can experience the positive passions derived from joy, when our power or perfection is increased; and we experience the negative passions derived from sadness, when our power or perfection is decreased. In the “Definitions of the Affects” at the end of *Ethics* III, Spinoza gives us precisely this view. After defining joy and sadness as we saw above, he says the following:

[N]o one can deny that sadness consists in a passage to a lesser perfection, not in the lesser perfection itself, since a man cannot be saddened insofar as he participates in some perfection. Nor can we say that sadness consists in the privation of a greater perfection. For a privation is nothing, whereas the affect of sadness is an act, which can therefore be no other act than that of passing to a lesser perfection, that is, an act by which man’s power of acting is diminished or restrained.⁶

I shall have more to say about the idea of passing between states of perfection in a moment, but for now it is important to realize the equivalence, on Spinoza’s view, between power and perfection and how the change in state creates the various passions that form the basis of Spinoza’s moral psychology.

How do we increase or decrease our power or perfection? Here we can fall back on standard Spinozistic doctrine, suggested in the passages immediately above. Our power or perfection is related to the adequacy of our ideas.⁷ The clearer our ideas, the greater our power or ability to produce effects – that is, the greater our perfection. And this aspect of Spinoza’s account of perfection is, of course, tied to the central moral teaching of the *Ethics*: “the more each of us is able to achieve in this kind of knowledge [i.e. knowledge of the third kind], the more he is conscious of himself and of God, i.e., the more perfect and blessed he is.”⁸

In the Preface to the Part IV of the *Ethics*, Spinoza analyzes the concepts of perfection, imperfection, good and evil in great detail, giving what amounts to his revaluation of all values. According to Spinoza, the very notion of perfection is deeply flawed. In the case of artifacts of human production, we call something perfect insofar as it has in fact been finished according to some original plan. But in the case of natural things, we cannot so easily apply the predicate ‘perfect’, for, Spinoza believes, there are no final causes. We can conceive of some model or ideal in the natural world and then claim that something is more or less perfect insofar as it fits into that model or ideal. But since the world was not produced according to a plan, our attributions of perfection or imperfection are typically made out of ignorance. But the notion of perfection, even in

⁶ G II 191/CWS 532.

⁷ There is, however, a further puzzling issue involved here; namely, that Spinoza sometimes calls an “adequate” idea a “perfect” idea. An analysis of perfection in this case would take us even further into Spinoza’s epistemology and philosophy of mind, an area outside the scope of the present paper.

⁸ G II 300/CWS 610.

our ignorance, remains tied to degree of reality or essence, as we have seen. Thus Spinoza writes,

Perfection and imperfection, therefore, are only modes of thinking, i.e., notions we are accustomed to feign because we compare individuals of the same species or genus to one another. This is why I said above (IID6) that by reality and perfection I understand the same thing. For we are accustomed to refer all individuals in Nature to one genus, which is called the most general, i.e., to the notion of being, which pertains absolutely to all individuals in Nature. So insofar as we refer all individuals in Nature to this genus, compare them to one another, and find that some have more being, or reality, than others, we say that some are more perfect than others. And insofar as we attribute something to them which involves negation, like a limit, an end, lack of power, and so on, we call them imperfect, because they do not affect our mind as much as those we call perfect, and not because something is lacking in them which is theirs, or because Nature has sinned. For nothing belongs to the nature of anything except what follows from the necessity of the nature of the efficient cause. And whatever follows from the necessity of the nature of the efficient cause happens necessarily.⁹

According to Spinoza, however, we need to retain the language of perfection and imperfection, just as we ought to retain the language of good and evil, because we are need to have some kind of model of human nature.

If perfection and imperfection are only modes of thinking, then what does it mean for Spinoza to define the passions in terms of the increase and decrease of perfection? Further, if perfection is to be interpreted literally or etymologically, as something's being done or completed or expressing an end, then how can perfection be used to explain joy and sadness? It *might* seem, then, that we have two notions of perfection at work in Spinoza's thought: first, as relating to power and to the adequacy of ideas; and second, as relating to the role of finite beings in nature. With the former notion, Spinoza allows for varying degrees of perfection among finite beings and changing degrees of perfection within any finite being in order to give an account of the passions and the possibility of our bringing our passions under control; with the latter notion, Spinoza tries to show us that the world as the expression of God's essence is in itself perfect, from which it follows that any finite creature must be perfect in its way. But can a being be perfect in its way and still be subject to an increase and decrease in its perfection? To answer this question we need to realize that there is an obvious temporal component in Spinoza's account of the passions: joy is the *transition* from lesser perfection to greater perfection; sadness, the *transition* from greater perfection to lesser perfection. As Spinoza himself says, "joy is not perfection itself. If a man were born with the perfection to which he

⁹ G II 207-208/CWS 545.

passes, he would possess it without an affect of joy.”¹⁰ In other words, we experience joy in the passing to a higher degree of perfection. Without the possibility of passing to a higher degree of perfection, we can experience no joy. Would we then experience no joy if we were completely perfect? Spinoza’s answer seems to be that we would not, just as God, presumably, experiences no joy. However, at any particular moment, presumably Spinoza would say that the finite being is perfect, or rather, *sub specie aeternitatis*, it is perfect.

Another point to bear in mind is that, for Spinoza, the notion of perfection or the relative power of any finite being or mode has a cognitive component. That is, on one level individuals are to recognize or be aware of their metaphysical status, as it were, their place in the world, their perfection, and in so doing experience some kind of joy or blessedness. On one level of Spinoza’s account of perfection, there is, of course, perfection throughout the world, and we are to recognize this perfection and realize happiness. On the other level, when Spinoza refers to the increasing and decreasing degrees of perfection, we are similarly to be aware of this perfection in us. In becoming aware of our own joy or sadness, we are aware of our increasing and decreasing perfection, that is, our ability to produce effects in the world; in being aware of our own power to produce effects in the world and similarly in being aware of our ability to resist the powers of things external to us, we are able to grasp the level of our own perfection in relation to the rest of the world.

While I shall have more to say concerning Spinoza later, let us now to Leibniz’s conception of the relation between perfection, power and the passions.

III

While Leibniz uses the notion of perfection often in ways quite similar to those of Spinoza (about which I shall speak in a few moments), he also appeals to the notion of perfection in a way that Spinoza never does. This is no doubt in part because the need never arises in Spinoza’s metaphysical system; namely, in order to explain the union of a composite substance. Most of us are certainly familiar with the claim that, in an organic creature or machine of nature, there is a special relation between monads that allows one monad to be “dominant” over the other monads. This “dominant monad” is usually equated with the soul, and the “subordinate monads” are the foundation of the phenomenon of body. And in explaining the relation of domination and subordination to Des Bosses, Leibniz writes in June of 1712 that domination and subordination consists in nothing but “degrees of perfection.”¹¹ In other words, a monad can be said to dominate other monads when it is more perfect than the others. But what does “perfection” mean in the context of intermonadic relations? Insofar as the fundamental activity of a monad is to perceive its world, we might think that a monad is dominant over other monads when its perceptions are somehow better, or clearer and less confused. This was definitely part of Leibniz’s view and has clear parallels to Spinoza’s thought concerning

¹⁰ G II 191/CWS 531.

¹¹ GP II 451.

the nature of adequate ideas. In §50 of the *Monadology* (1714), however, Leibniz adds, “one creature is more perfect than another insofar as one finds in it that which provides an *a priori* reason for what happens in the other...”¹² And so, we ought naturally to conclude that a monad is dominant over other monads when it is more perfect than the others, that is, for Leibniz, when one finds in the one monad *a priori* reasons for what happens in the others.¹³

While Leibniz, like Spinoza, will explain the nature of perfection in terms of our ideas, his use of the notion of perfection is in sharp contrast with the uses of perfection that we found in Spinoza. Indeed, it is a use that is made possible only by Leibniz’s strong account of the interdependence of creatures, of his doctrine of marks and traces and his pre-established harmony. In saying that one thing is dominant over another when it contains reasons for what happens in the other thing, Leibniz couples the notion of perfection with the idea that individual substances contain expressions of the entire universe, differing only in their clarity. In the passage from the *Monadology* (§49) referred to at the beginning of the paper, Leibniz says, “The creature is said to *act* externally insofar as it is perfect, and *to be acted upon* [*patir*] by another, insofar as it is imperfect,” and goes on to say, “we attribute *action* to a monad insofar as it has distinct perceptions, and *passion*, insofar it has confused perceptions.”¹⁴ The clearer our perceptions become, the more our perfection increases. Leibniz relates the perfection and the quality of perceptions, though, precisely because it is in the nature of monads to perceive the world – and, more, it is in the essence of individual substances to contain expressions of the entire universe. The more accurately monads or individual substances express the world, the more perfect they are; this much of Leibniz’s doctrine seems Spinozistic. But there is the additional component of Leibniz’s doctrine here: the greater the extent to which individual substances contain reasons for what happens in other substances, the more power they have and the more active they are; and a being suffers or experiences (negative) passions when its essence does not contain a sufficiently distinct picture of its relation to the rest of the world.

This account of the action and passion of a monad also shows us the strong relation between perfection and power in Leibniz’s system. One being has power or can act over another being when it is more perfect than the other. Even if this power is in some sense “ideal,” it is still the case that when we attribute power to some being, we do so because of its inherent perfection. As an epistemological matter, however, we, as observers of the world, must go in the other direction; that is, when we perceive some kind of causal relation between two things in the world, which is, of course, to observe the effects of the powers of the things, we are allowed to attribute degrees of perfection to the things that we observe. We might experience difficulties, however, in attributing the appropriate degree of perfection to anything absent our observing any kind of causal powers. In other words, while Leibniz, working in the same tradition as Spinoza, also

¹² GP VI 615/AG 219.

¹³ For a more detailed analysis of this issue, see my “On Monadic Domination in Leibniz’s Metaphysics,” *British Journal for the History of Philosophy* 10:3 (August 2002), pp. 379-99.

¹⁴ GP VI 615/AG 219.

equates perfection with the degree of reality of a thing, this degree of reality is not observable without taking into account its causal powers. All of this leads to one of the crucial features of Leibniz's account of the nature of perfection, power, and the passions: what I shall refer to as his "conservation law." In §52 of the *Monadology*, Leibniz writes that "actions and passions among creatures are mutual."¹⁵ In other words, for any increase in perfection in one substance, there is a corresponding decrease in perfection in some other substance(s).

Leibniz makes explicit the close relation between physical or metaphysical perfection and moral perfection in many of his works.¹⁶ He says in *On the Ultimate Origination of Things* (1697), for example,

[N]ot only is the world physically (or, if you prefer, metaphysically) most perfect, that is, that the series of things which has been brought forth is the one in which there is, in actuality, the greatest amount of reality, but it follows that the world is morally most perfect, since moral perfection is in reality physical perfection with respect to minds. From this it follows that the world is not only the most admirable machine, but insofar as it is made up of minds, it is also the best republic, the republic through which minds derive the greatest possible happiness and joy, in which their physical perfection consists.¹⁷

For Leibniz, of course, we live in the best of all possible worlds, which means, among other things, that the world is the most perfect place that God could have created. The world is the most perfect place, Leibniz tells us here, because there is maximal reality; or, as we can learn elsewhere, God creates the most variety with complete harmony among creatures.^{18, 19} Further, as we see here, the moral perfection of the world – by which Leibniz means the extent to which the world is good – is simply the "physical perfection with respect to minds." What exactly does this mean? Leibniz gives us a clue when he says that the happiness and joy of minds consists in their physical perfection. But even this seems to be vague. After all, we may know that the physical or metaphysical perfection of the world is constituted by God's creation of the (maximal) reality (and harmony) in the world; but this does not seem to tell us what it means to talk about the physical or metaphysical perfection of any particular finite mind. And, insofar as we are interested in the moral perfection of the finite mind, which, I take to mean, among other things, the happiness of the particular finite mind, we seem to be able to only account for the mind in its relation to the whole of the world.

In his correspondence with Wolff Leibniz has more to say about the nature of perfection. He writes in the winter of 1714-15, "The perfection about which you ask is

¹⁵ GP VI 615/AG 219.

¹⁶ See, especially, *Theodicy* (1710), *passim*.

¹⁷ GP VII 306/AG 152-53.

¹⁸ See, for example, *Principles of Nature and Grace*, §10. In addition, for Leibniz, this greatest of reality or variety and harmony is to arise from the greatest simplicity.

¹⁹ While this topic has been discussed often, I would refer the reader to David Blumenfeld's "Perfection and happiness in the best possible world," in *The Cambridge Companion to Leibniz*, ed. N. Jolley, (Cambridge, 1994), pp. 382-410.

the degree of positive reality, or what comes to the same thing, the degree of affirmative intelligibility, so that something more perfect is something in which more things worthy of note are found.”²⁰ In this case, it seems clear that, as I mentioned above, Leibniz’s conception of perfection is quite similar to at least one of Spinoza’s conceptions of perfection – as synonymous with the degree of reality of a being. And, in a later letter from May 1715, Leibniz says the following:

When I say that something in which more is worthy of observation is more perfect, I understand general observations or rules, not exceptions, which constitute imperfections. The more there is worthy of observation in a thing, the more general properties, the more harmony it contains; therefore, it is the same to look for perfection in an essence and in the properties that flow from the essence ... In morals I set up our *happiness* [*felicitas*] as an end; this I define as a state of enduring joy [*laetitia*]. Joy I define as an extraordinary predominance of pleasure [*voluptas*], for in the midst of joy we can sense certain sorrows, but sorrows which are hardly to be considered in comparison with the pleasures... Moreover, it is necessary that the joy be enduring, so that it not be withdrawn by a subsequent greater sadness [*tristitia*] by chance. Furthermore, *pleasure* is the sensation of perfection. *Perfection* is the harmony of things, or the state where everything is worthy of being observed, that is, the state of agreement or identity in variety; you can even say that it is the degree of contemplability. Indeed, order, regularity, and harmony come to the same thing. You can even say that it is the degree of essence, if essence is calculated from harmonizing properties, which give essence weight and momentum, so to speak. Hence, it also follows quite nicely that God, that is, the supreme mind, is endowed with perception, indeed to the greatest degree; otherwise he would not care about the harmonies.²¹

There are several things in this passage that deserve comment. Leibniz seems to incorporate some of the language concerning the nature of pleasure and joy that we saw Spinoza use in *Ethics* III above. But does he use the concepts in the same way? The answer is clearly that he does not. According to Leibniz, happiness is enduring joy, joy, a prevalence of pleasure, and pleasure, the awareness or contemplation of perfection. For Leibniz, then, in contrast with Spinoza, happiness or joy does not consist in the increase of perfection of a being; it consists rather in the awareness of or observation of the perfection of the world – or, as Leibniz claims, the awareness of the harmony, regularity and beauty of the world. According to Spinoza’s teaching in the last two books of the *Ethics*, we are, of course, to experience a sense of blessedness or freedom from the passions in the contemplation of God – or, the determined and perfect nature of the world

²⁰ GLW 161/AG 230.

²¹ GLW 170-72/AG 232-34.

and our place in it. But, still, the passage with which we started showed that, for Spinoza, joy consisted in the increase of perfection, not the sensation of perfection itself.

IV

We have then several conceptions of perfection in Spinoza and Leibniz: first, what Leibniz calls “metaphysical perfection”; second, “moral perfection”; and, third, what I shall call “perfection of finite essence.” These conceptions are, of course, related. And, in my view, they are necessary for Spinoza and Leibniz because both wish to claim that the world is perfect insofar as *it is* the perfect God (that is, insofar as the world consists in the modes of God) or insofar as it is the creation of the perfect God. On the other hand, both Spinoza and Leibniz wish to allow for the possibility of an increase in happiness. That is, both Spinoza and Leibniz retain in their metaphysics a way for the perfection of a finite being to increase or decrease, and, by allowing for the changing perfection of a being, they allow for a being to become more or less happy, to express greater or lesser degrees of its finite essence, to express greater or lesser degrees of power.

For both Leibniz and Spinoza, the perfections of the creatures relate in an obvious way to the creator or nature. But, Leibniz, not surprisingly, will refer the perfection of any creature to the perfection of God, while saddling the creature with its own imperfection. For example, consider the following passage from the *Principles of Nature and Grace* (1714):

The reason that made things exist through him, makes them still depend on him while they exist and bring about their effects; and they continually receive from him that which causes them to have any perfection at all. But the imperfection that remains in them comes from the essential and original limitation of created things.²²

Leibniz does not accept Spinoza’s account of the nature of God and the consequences that Spinoza draws from it; Leibniz adheres strongly to his rather traditional theistic world-view and, therefore, wants to attribute imperfection to individual creatures. Spinoza, on the other hand, will distribute perfection and imperfection equally to God and his modes.

Further, it seems that, for Spinoza, the passions are determined by an awareness on the part of a finite being of the power of that finite being. A finite being, in order to have the appropriate passions, must understand whether its perfection or power is increasing or decreasing. For Leibniz, on the other hand, we derive pleasure from a sensation or contemplation of perfection, but this perfection is something else – the perfection of the world. According to Leibniz, it is God’s awareness of the relative perfection of beings that determines whether or not they may be said to act or to suffer. And it is, furthermore, God’s awareness of the relative perfection of monads in a composite that provides the ideal foundation of the union and interaction of monads in a composite.

²² GP VI 603/AG 210.

I began this essay with a passage from Leibniz in which he claims that happiness, pleasure, perfection, being, power, freedom, harmony, order and beauty are all interconnected. How some of these ideas are tied together should be clear by now. On the level of individuals and on the level of God, perfection, power and being are virtually synonymous for both Spinoza and Leibniz. From their perfection and power, creatures can begin to derive happiness and pleasure – though the accounts of Leibniz and Spinoza differ in some details. Further, while Leibniz might stress the harmony of the world and Spinoza the order (at least insofar as the order of the world is to represent the expression of the modes of God in a determined way), still the understanding of finite minds of the harmony, order and beauty of the world similarly leads to happiness and pleasure.

In the passage with which I started, however, Leibniz also claims that the interconnection of these ideas is a fact that has been rightly perceived only by a few. From what I have said in this paper, it should be clear that Spinoza was one of the few who had rightly perceived this relation of perfection, power, the passions and the general harmony, order and beauty of the world. And of the many who had failed to see this interconnection, the most notable was perhaps Descartes. In his attempt to explain the passions of the soul principally in “mechanical” terms, Descartes “fails” to give us a truly metaphysical account of the nature of the passions – one that must necessarily take into account the essence of creatures, their perfection, and their understanding of their place in the world.

V

Thus far we have seen some important ways in which the concept of perfection is used by Spinoza and Leibniz in their accounts of world. But there is another issue that is worth considering, namely, can the world itself increase in perfection? We have seen that individuals can increase in perfection, but does this mean that the world as a whole can be said to increase in perfection? Such questions are more difficult to answer than they might appear. Spinoza says little on the issue, and as Pauline Phemister has noted, Leibniz seems to express contradictory views in the course of his career.²³

I shall come back to Spinoza later in this section, but I want to suggest one answer now. It seems to me that a Spinozist would answer in roughly the following way. If perfection is to be equated with power or the degree of reality of a thing, then the question becomes whether God or nature could increase in its power or degree of reality. Now, on first glance it might seem that God or nature could not become more powerful or come to possess more reality. God is infinite, and there can be no increase in God’s power because that would suggest that God or nature is somehow *less* than it will be, which ought somehow to be taken as a kind of limitation on God. But I think that this line of argument depends upon a conception of the infinite that Spinoza does not (nor

²³ Pauline Phemister, “Progress and perfection of the world and individual in Leibniz’s philosophy, 1694-1697,” in *Akten des VIII. Internationalen Leibniz-Kongresses*, ed. J. Herbst et al. (Hannover, 2006), pp. 805-12. As is obvious from the title of her paper, Phemister looks principally at texts from the mid-1690’s, whereas I wish to make use of other texts as well. Still, much of what I say in this section is a result of reflecting on the issues that she addresses in her paper.

should anyone) share. After all, it might be possible for God in the unfolding of its essence to in fact become more and more powerful. This does not mean that God is not infinite *now*; rather, it means that God or nature, because unique, is at all times absolutely unlimited. In other words, God can be considered both infinite and always increasing in power over the course of the unfolding of its essence. Put another way, there should not be anything wrong with imagining a Spinozistic world such that many of the finite individuals of the world increase in power and thereby lead to a general increase of the power of the world.

It should be noted that this view is possible in part because Spinoza does *not* endorse a conservation law of the sort endorsed by Leibniz, where the increase in power of one thing is only possible because of a decrease in power of some other thing. And, indeed, this will be one of the principal sticking points for Leibniz in his answer to the question whether the world can increase in perfection over time. We should be clear: an obviously attractive theological view would be that this world is progressing over time towards increased perfection; or, if more and more souls do the right thing, then the general state of perfection of the world ought to increase. In other words, one might think that, if finite beings achieve salvation or arrive at blessedness, then their progression must contribute to an overall increase in the perfection of the world. Moreover, some might hold that *universal salvation* is possible, that is, that *all* souls can come to know God, achieve blessedness, or whatever, and in doing so, lead to the perfection of the world-whole. As much as Leibniz might be attracted to this kind of picture, his equating of perfection and power and his conservation law seem to render this impossible. This is certainly why we encounter his conflicting statements.

Consider, first, a piece written while under the influence of Francis Mercury van Helmont, *An Mundus Perfectione Crescat* (1694-96?), in which Leibniz suggests that the world in fact cannot increase in perfection. He begins this short piece as follows: “It is to be inquired whether the entire world increases or decreases in perfection, whether in fact it always maintains the same degree of perfection, which I prefer to think, even though different parts exchange perfection among themselves so as to transfer it to each other.”²⁴ According to Leibniz, substances can, and in fact, do increase in perfection over time, but, when they do, other substances decrease in perfection. This much seems similar to other views we have seen before, but Leibniz also says in this short text that “blessedness does not consist in some highest degree, but in a perpetual increase of joys.”²⁵ This, of course, conflicts with the view that he will express later to Wolff and that we have already considered, according to which happiness is the highest end for human beings and that it consists of *enduring joy*. But perhaps this of little concern to us. What is important is that the world in itself is to be considered as having a constant state of perfection or degree of essence over time. Leibniz also remarks in this short piece that God cannot increase in perfection; he says, “That highest being does not increase in perfection since it exists outside of time and change, and it comprises the present and the

²⁴ Grua I, 95.

²⁵ Ibid.

future equally.”²⁶ Of course, this little argument works well for a transcendent God, but it will not work for Spinoza’s God or nature.

It seems to me that this is most likely the view that Leibniz *should* hold given the bulk of his metaphysical theses (especially his conservation law). But, as is so often the case with Leibniz, we can find other texts that conflict with this view. Consider, for example, his well-known *On the Ultimate Origination of Things*, in which Leibniz says the following:

[W]e must also recognize a certain constant and unbounded progress in the whole universe, so that it always proceeds to greater development [*cultus*]... And there is a ready answer to the objection that if this were so, then the world should have become a Paradise long ago. Many substances have already attained great perfection. However, because of the infinite divisibility of the continuum, there are always parts asleep in the abyss of things, yet to be roused and yet to be advanced to greater and better things, advanced, in a word, to greater cultivation. Thus, progress never comes to an end.²⁷

Here Leibniz clearly endorses the idea that the world can increase in perfection over time, and he even addresses a problem similar to that which I am considering, namely, why is the world not already perfect? His answer: there are an infinity of minds in the “abyss” which will likely never increase in perfection. Nevertheless, the world is in constant progress towards complete perfection, even if this will never be reached. And so, to the other question raised above, whether *all* souls could in principle increase in perfection, the answer is clearly negative.²⁸

Finally, in a short piece, *De Mundi Perfectione Continuo Augente*, dated at 1689-90 by the Academy editors, Leibniz addresses our question directly. Since this piece has only been published in Bodemann and the recent fourth volume of series six of the Academy edition and is therefore not well-known, I shall translate it here in its entirety.

Having considered everything, I believe the world continually increases in perfection and does not return in a circle as if by revolution. For thus a final cause would be absent. And even if pleasure is not in God, nevertheless there is this analogy to pleasure, that he rejoices in the perpetual success of his plans. But there would be no pleasure but a stupor if I were to persist in the same state however excellent. Happiness requires a perpetual progress towards new pleasures and perfections. Indeed, all things are present as it were to God, and He grasps everything together at once, but the execution needs time; and He ought not to have brought about the acme [*summa*] all at once, for otherwise there would

²⁶ Ibid.

²⁷ GP VII 308/AG 154-55.

²⁸ This view is likewise advanced in *Theodicy* (1710): “...one could say that the whole series of things to infinity might be the best possible, though what exists throughout the universe in each segment of time be not the best. It could therefore be that the universe is always becoming better and better, if the nature of things were such that it is not permitted to arrive at the best at once.” (GP VI 237)

have been no further change, nor to pass from one state of perfection to its equal, for otherwise there would have been no goal [*scopus*] in His acting. The universe is like a plant or an animal insofar as it tends toward maturity. But it differs in that it never arrives at its highest stage of maturity, nor does it ever regress or grow old.²⁹

This text demonstrates a different perspective on the relation between God and the world He chose to create. While it is not correct to claim that God experiences happiness per se because God is not, strictly speaking, in the world, the world does unfold in time, and, insofar as its perfection continually increases, God grasps this increase in perfection and can be said to rejoice. In other words, God can experience joy in grasping the unfolding of His chosen world, and God can be said to experience more joy if the world increases in perfection over time than if its degree of perfection remains constant.

I think that the argument that we find here is unique in Leibniz's corpus and it should be analyzed further. It seems to proceed in the following way:

- (1) The world can either be increasing in perfection, decreasing in perfection, or remaining at a constant state of perfection.
- (2) The world cannot be decreasing in perfection because that is manifestly contrary to divine benevolence.
- (3) Suppose it is in a constant perfected state (i.e., the world could not get any better).
- (4) If this were so, then there could be no change. (Any change would constitute a decrease in perfection.)
- (5) But there is change, therefore...
- (6) Suppose the world has a constant degree of perfection with changes made possible by increases in perfection in one individual and corresponding decreases in perfection in some other individual(s).
- (7) If this were the case, then God could not be acting for reasons with some final purpose in view.
- (8) But God does act for ends.
- (9) Therefore, the world must be increasing in perfection.

This argument should hardly strike us as above reproach. But it is interesting to see that Leibniz seems to have no problem allowing for a gradual increase in the perfection of the world at the cost of his laws regarding the conservation of force in the world. The crucial premise is, of course, (7), and we should consider this in more detail. Why is it the case that the conservation view should run afoul of the Principle of Sufficient Reason? We have seen that, for Leibniz, if *a* increases in perfection, there must be a corresponding decrease in perfection in some *b*. Now, this in itself is not problematic, for God presumably could have a reason for precisely this change of states of affairs. The problem with the argument in this short text is that Leibniz tries to generalize the point: there must be some reason for the constant degree of perfection to be constituted in this way rather than in some other way. But from the point of view of the entire universe, it is

²⁹ A VI iv 1642.

irrelevant if a increases in perfection, remains constant, or decreases in perfection. Therefore, there is no reason for the constancy of degree. In other words, if the total degree of perfection of the world is to remain constant over time, it would seem that God could have no reason for preferring one distribution of perfections over another. To see this, suppose that we have two worlds W_1 and W_2 which have the same quantity of perfection. And let us further suppose that in W_1 a increases in perfection while b decreases in perfection, whereas in W_2 b increases in perfection while a decreases in perfection. According to the Principle of Sufficient Reason, if the quantity of perfection of W_1 and W_2 is equal, then God can have no reason for choosing one world over another; His choice of one world over another would be arbitrary, which is impossible. On the other hand, if worlds differ not only in their total degree of perfection at any time but also in their tendency to increase or decrease in perfection over time, then it is clearly the case that God ought to choose the world that is greatest not only in momentary quantity of essence (perfection) but also in its path toward absolute perfection.

The position that Leibniz adopts in this text helps to provide a fuller picture of his theodicy. When we consider the matter of God's free choice of the best of all possible worlds, we typically claim that God chose the world that had the greatest degree of perfection possible, by which Leibniz gives us to understand that the principal criterion is that this world had the greatest possible variety and the greatest possible order.³⁰ But now it seems that we should also include as a criterion for judging which world is best that the world must be increasing at a rate greater than all other worlds. Of course, this raises the following issue. Suppose we have two worlds W_1 and W_2 . Could it be the case that W_1 is superior to W_2 in terms of the combination of variety and order but that W_2 is superior to W_1 in terms of the rate of increase of perfection in the world? If so, then we could say that God, when choosing the best possible world, looks first at the variety/order matrix and second at the rate of increase of perfection, or vice versa. Given the sheer number of times that Leibniz discusses the order/variety matrix, it would seem that this is indeed the principal criterion. But we still might wonder: if God could have added one law of nature and thereby increase the rate of increase of perfection of the world, is it not the case that that world would be superior?

As I mentioned above, there are obvious theological reasons for holding that the world can in fact increase in perfection. If universal salvation is to be possible, if, that is, all souls are in principle able to achieve the happiness, blessedness and knowledge necessary to become members of the kingdom of God, then, it seems, that it must be possible for the world *in toto* to increase in perfection. For the increase in perfection of all or a majority of minds must lead to an increase in the total degree of perfection of the world. We should note that Leibniz need not be committed to *universal* salvation, for, after all, his theology also allows for the *damnation* of many souls, consistent with Christian orthodoxy. Nevertheless, if the world is such that more and more souls achieve blessedness, then it would seem as though the total perfection of the world ought to

³⁰ Cf. *Principles of Nature and Grace* §10 (GP VI 603).

increase. But we have also seen that Leibniz's equating of perfection and power and his conservation law seem to make it impossible for the world to increase in perfection. One way out of this dilemma would be to say that the conservation law does not apply to minds or souls but only to bodies in the physical natural world. This is, of course, inconsistent with Leibnizian idealism. But that does not mean that Leibniz did not try out precisely this idea. Consider the following from §36 of the *Discourse on Metaphysics*, when Leibniz was not so obviously an idealist (if at all):

[M]inds are the most perfectible substances, and their perfections are peculiar in that they interfere with each other the least, or rather they aid one another the most, for only the most virtuous can be the most perfect friends. Whence it obviously follows that God, who always aims for the greatest perfection in general, will pay the greatest attention to minds and will give them the greatest perfection that universal harmony can allow, not only in general, but to each of them in particular.³¹

What does Leibniz mean when he says that the perfections of the mind interfere with each other the least? I take it that the point is that perfections of the mind include, presumably, such things as knowledge, love, happiness and so on, which, on a very common understanding, need not take away from the knowledge, love, and happiness of other minds; indeed, it is usually thought that they can contribute to the perfections of other minds. In other words, the perfections and powers of rational souls are of a different *kind* from the perfections and powers of bodies; the former do not necessarily conflict with one another, the latter do.

Before concluding, I would like to return to Spinoza's view of the matter. I said above that, although Spinoza's position is not obvious, we can interpret his position in such a way to allow for the increase in perfection in a Spinozistic world. God or Nature is perfect in part because infinite, but infinity need imply only an absence of restraint. Therefore, the Spinozistic world could in the unfolding of its essence increase in extent and power, and its modes along with it. Furthermore, I think that part of the answer in the case of Spinoza echoes what we have just seen in Leibniz's claims from the *Discourse on Metaphysics*. That is, that a certain class of perfections and active affects are such that they do not interfere with each other; indeed, they can be said to increase in the appropriate conditions. For Spinoza, it is not just that the sage will come to have a more and more complete understanding of the world and thereby become more perfect and develop more power with respect to his passions, it is also that when he lives together in harmony and justice with others, he can actually increase his and other's perfection. As Spinoza says in *Ethics* IVp37, "The good which everyone who seeks virtue wants for himself, he also desires for other men; and this Desire is greater as his knowledge of God is greater."³² It is clear that Spinoza thought that states of free men were most conducive to the flourishing of the greatest number of people. And progress towards this state of

³¹ A VI iv 1586/AG 67.

³² G II 235/CWS 564-65.

affairs could in no way detract from the freedom, happiness, and blessedness of others. In short, progress towards a democratic, republican ideal would indeed amount to an increase in perfection of the world.

VI

While both Leibniz and Spinoza make strong cases for equating metaphysical or moral perfection with power and this in turn with a power over one's self and negative affects, Leibniz seems to be in the more difficult philosophical position. As we have seen, Leibniz endorses two positions that stand in conflict with one another: on the one hand, that, for every increase in perfection or power of one individual, there must be a corresponding decrease in perfection in some other individual(s), that is, that there is a conservation of force and power in the world; on the other hand, that the world could increase in perfection. We explored one way in which Leibniz might resolve this dilemma, but this in turn is inconsistent with his idealism. It seems, in other words, that Leibniz is in something of a bind, requiring that he abandon at least one of the following ideas: (a) the relation of perfection and power; (b) the conservation law; (c) the increase in perfection of the world; or (d) his idealism.

On the other hand, given Spinoza's monism, there is nothing that necessarily hinders the modes of the infinite substance from becoming more and more powerful. Indeed, all modes can in principle become more perfect and experience greater joy. The problem with conceiving the possibility of the increase in perfection of God or nature was to be found in our conception of the infinity of God. To accept the thesis that the world itself could become more perfect would mean to accept the thesis that the infinite God lacked something now but had it latter. But perhaps we simply have to consider God's infinity as being constituted by unboundedness. For example, consider the universe: we might think of it now as being infinite, insofar as there is nothing constraining it; nevertheless, we can still recognize its expansion; and instead of a principle of entropy, we could easily imagine a contrary principle. Further, according to Spinoza, the world unfolds according to the infinite essence of God, but there is nothing preventing that essence from increasing in power and perfection and its modes along with it. In other words, whereas Leibniz seemed to present us with a zero-sum game with his conservation law, this is not the case for Spinoza.

Let us return to the passage with which we began. Leibniz said that "happiness, pleasure, love, perfection, being, power, freedom, harmony, order, and beauty are all tied to each other, a truth which is rightly perceived by few." I have suggested that Spinoza might have been one of the few to have rightly perceived the connection of these concepts. But now we see that, while Leibniz might have believed in the connection of these concepts, he cannot *also* maintain that with some of his other most important theses. Indeed, the situation seems most dire for the possibility that the world can increase in perfection over time. But Spinoza, our unique neo-Stoic, crypto-atheist, does in fact present us with a metaphysics that recognizes the relation between metaphysical and moral perfection and power and, at the same time, allows for the world as a whole to increase in perfection. Contrary to Spinoza's reputation for a hard and cold

Weltanschauung and Leibniz's reputation for optimism, we see here who in fact allows for more hope – if such hope we need.