



Blityri

Studi di storia delle idee sui segni e le lingue

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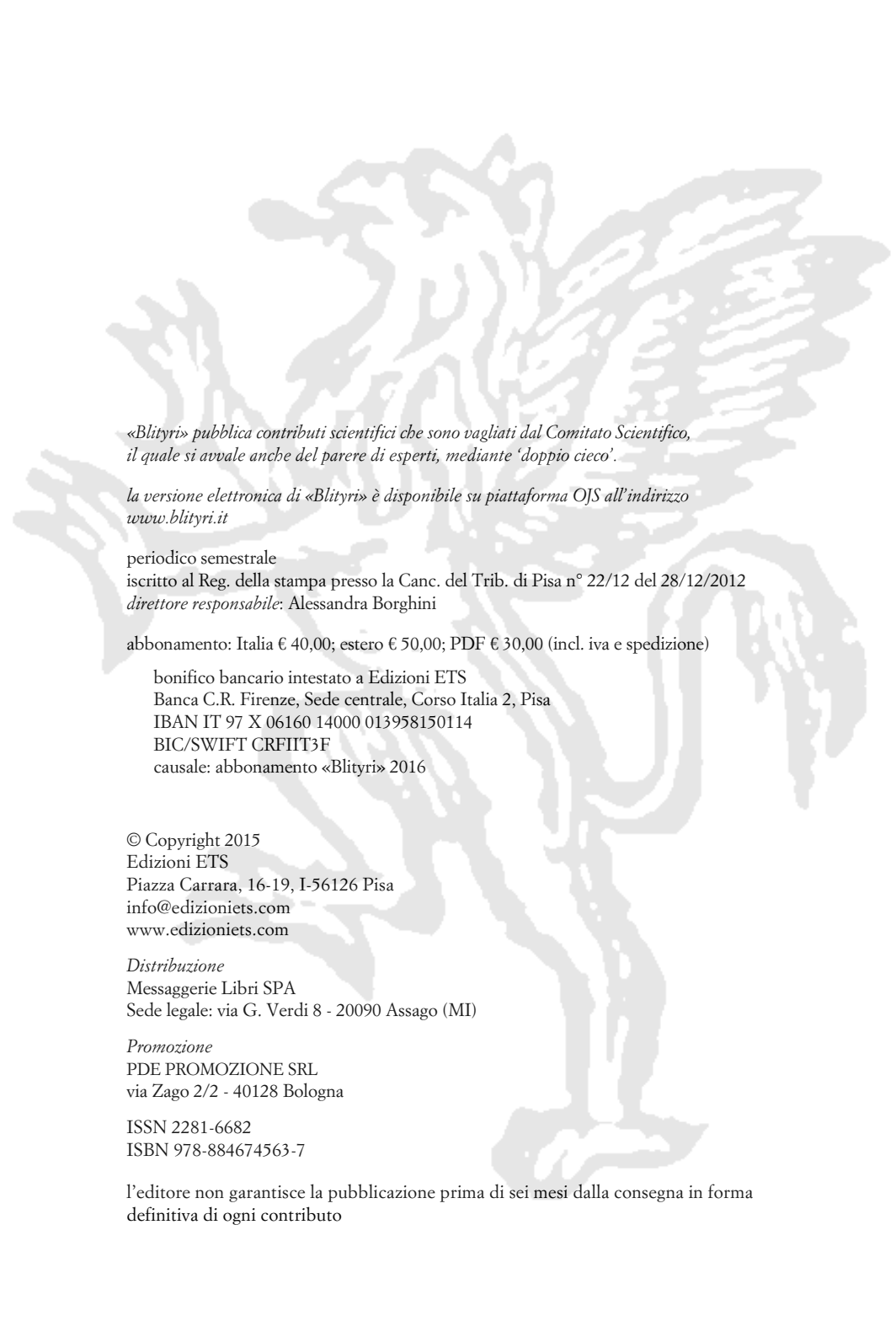
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Leibniz's Passionate Knowledge

Markku Roinila*

Abstract: According to Leibniz, the world is constantly in a dynamic process of increasing perfection and men are supposed to contribute to this process within the limits of their abilities. This happens through one's self-perfection which is a process of becoming virtuous. I will discuss how this moral self-perfection is related to cognition and show that the rational, controlled thinking that Leibniz advocated is motivated by intelligent passions. The co-operation of confused and distinct cognition in a wise man reflects Leibniz's interest to aesthetics and emotions.

Keywords: emotions, cognition, perfection, Leibniz, virtue.

A Premise

Leibniz thought that the world is constantly in a dynamic process of increasing perfection. Men are supposed to contribute to this process within the limits of their abilities. This happens through one's self-perfection which is a process of becoming virtuous. A virtuous man finds one's pleasure in the well-being of other men and with systematic virtue she can gain happiness.

In this article I am interested in how this moral self-perfection is related to cognition. I will show that the rational, controlled thinking that Leibniz advocated is motivated by intelligent passions, giving rise to a positive disquiet which motivates men to seek knowledge, and that cognitive clarity can develop in this process. The co-operation of confused and distinct cognition in a wise man reflects Leibniz's interest to aesthetics and emotions.

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Joy and happiness

Joy is a central emotion for Leibniz. He defined it as a “state where pleasure predominates in us” (*Nouveaux essais sur l’entendement humain* (NE) II, xx, §7; A VI, 6: 166, RB: 166)¹. Therefore joy is not complete bliss, pleasure with no bounds. It is constituted by semi-pleasures, minute, fleeting impressions of pleasure and at all times the balance may change in favour of semi-sufferings which are minute perceptions of pain. So we can get pleasure out of hearing music even when we are otherwise unhappy. When pleasure dominates over displeasure, we can be said to feel joy and in an opposite case sorrow.

Joy is connected to metaphysical perfection which is the source of pleasure. As God is the absolutely perfect being (*Discours de métaphysique*, §1), one would think that joy is at least distinct cognition in Leibniz’s complex hierarchy of knowledge in the article *Meditationes de cognitione, veritate et ideis* (1684)². However, joy does not fit the description he gave of distinctness, according to which it is either such that the notion is connected to marks and tests sufficient to distinguish a thing from all similar bodies or a notion which is common to several senses (such as number, magnitude or shape), or many states of mind of which Leibniz mentioned hope and fear (A VI, 4: 586-587). In Leibniz’s view, we cannot always define joy by a clear object as in hope or fear. It can arise without any apparent reason or from perceiving beauty in general, for example in nature, as nothing surpasses the divine perfections (*Essais de théodicée*, § 278). In the latter case the cause for the joy is a sense of harmony, of perfection, rather than acquiring an object we are looking for, such as a book we like to read³.

Joy fits much better to a description of a lower-level type of cognition Leibniz gave in *Meditationes*, namely clear, but confused. He said that knowledge is clear when I have the means for recognizing the thing represented. Clear knowledge can be either confused or

¹ I have used the following abbreviations for editions of Leibniz’s works: A=Leibniz (1923-); AG=Leibniz (1989); GP=Leibniz (1965); L=Leibniz (1969); RB=Leibniz (1997).

² For simplicity, I have used cognition, idea, knowledge and perception in the same sense in this article as the differences of meaning are not significant for my purposes. In *Meditations* Leibniz discusses ideas and knowledge.

³ See also Beiser (2009: 38-39).

distinct. Of clear, but confused knowledge Leibniz gave the following description:

It is confused when I cannot enumerate one by one marks sufficient for differentiating a thing from others, even though the thing does indeed have such marks and requisites into which its notion can be resolved. And so we recognize colours, smells, tastes, and other particular objects of the senses clearly enough, and we distinguish them from one another, but only through the simple testimony of the senses, not by way of explicit marks (*A VI*, 4: 586; *AG*: 24).

Leibniz argued that clear, but confused perceptions can be known through the testimony of senses and he defined sensation as a perception with memory (*GP VI*: 600). Beauty is a typical instance of a clear, but confused idea – in *Meditationes* Leibniz discussed works of art of which we can say that something pleases us, but we cannot really explain why (*A VI*, 4: 586). Joy looks to be comparable to a complicated aesthetic experience which we can distinguish from other experiences, but it is hard to describe them to other persons. This is in line with what Leibniz said in *NE I*, ii, §1: joy and sorrow are based on inner knowledge and confused knowledge, for one only senses what they are (*A VI*, 6: 88)⁴. To borrow a concept from Frederick C. Beiser (2009: 40), this kind of clear, but confused cognition is confused intellectual cognition.

A similar description applies to happiness. It is a composite state of mind which follows from virtuous action and Leibniz defined it as a lasting joy (*NE I*, ii, § 3; *A VI*, 6: 90). However, happiness lasts only as long as we are virtuous, as Leibniz argued in §18 of *Principes de la nature et de la grace, fondés en raison*:

Our happiness will never consist, and must never consist, in complete joy, in which nothing is left to desire, and which would dull our mind, but must consist in a perpetual progress to new pleasures and new perfections (*GP VI*: 606 ; *AG*: 213).

⁴ Of interest here is the fact that when drafting the page, Leibniz first wrote “one does really know” instead of sense. On the profound aesthetic quality of Leibniz’s philosophy, see Beiser (2009: ch. 1). According to Beiser (2009: 33 & 36-37), Leibniz sees all pleasure as an aesthetic phenomenon. I think this is an exaggeration. Although Leibniz prefers intellectual pleasures, he also gives weight to present sensible pleasures (see *NE II*, xxi, §64).

Feelings, Passions and Disquiet

The requirement of progress to new pleasures is in fact the foundation of Leibniz's theory of virtue. In *NE I*, ii he argued that men have an instinctive *conatus* for pleasure which is connected to perfection: "I believe that fundamentally pleasure is a sense of perfection, and pain a sense of imperfection, each being notable enough for one to become aware of it" (*NE II*, xxi, §41; *A VI*, 6: 194; *RB*: 194). Leibniz's conception of joy is in fact close to the one presented by Descartes in his *Passions de l'âme I*, 91 where he distinguished the passion of the soul from intellectual joy: "...purely intellectual joy arises in the soul through an action of the soul alone...it may be said to be a pleasant emotion which the soul arouses in itself whenever it enjoys a good which its understanding represents to it as its own" (*CSM I*: 361).

Joy can be understood as an intellectual feeling which arises in the souls on account of certain kind of perceptions. What makes (intellectual) joy (and sorrow) different from other emotions is the fact that it does not seem to have a clear object. In this sense it is more of a positive general restlessness than a passion (*NE xxi*, § 39). However, joy and sorrow are closely related to other intellectual passions of hope and love.

Between joy and hope there seems to be a very close union, a kind of symbiosis. Joy gives rise to hope and hope sustains joy, motivating our striving for intellectual pleasure. The passion of hope is related to intellectual activity such as curiosity and courage which again is essential for the practice of science and promoting the common good and perfection⁵.

Love is another intellectual passion that is closely related to our intellectual development. In Leibniz's view, sociability, justice and the goal of ethics are essentially related to (disinterested) love, which he first discussed in his 1671 memoir *Elementa juris naturalis* (*A VI*, 1: 431-485). He tried to combine egoistic and altruistic motivations in his doctrine, although it is clear that the egoistic motivation is primary. A Leibnizian wise person is motivated by the pleasure she receives from perceiving increasing perfection in the other person and is moved to imitate those perfections. In this way the other's

⁵ On Leibniz's views on hope, see Roinila (2012).

perfections are transferred to her and the person she loves perceives this increase of perfection in her, which again motivates that person to love her and increase one's own perfection. This reciprocal mechanism of love creates a community of disinterested lovers, whose ultimate source of pleasure are God's perfections⁶.

This brings us back to joy. Love of God motivates our actions as His creation, the world, raises in us intellectual disquiet, a sort of desire for further pleasure. It motivates us to practice science to study nature and once we have a conception of metaphysical goodness or perfection, we can know for certain how this good can be advanced. Leibniz saw disquiet (*inquiétude* is his term for Locke's uneasiness) as a positive state of mind. Whereas for Locke uneasiness is a pressing, actual suffering, for Leibniz disquiet is rather to be understood as "imperceptible little urges which keep us constantly in suspense" (*NE* II, xx, § 6; *A* VI, 6: 166; *RB*: 166). As he said in *NE* II, xx, §8, "there is disquiet even in joy, for the latter makes a man alert, active and hopeful of further success" (*A* VI, 6: 167; *RB*: 167). Therefore we can see that the confused element of the intellectual feeling of joy is in fact useful to our happiness, as it motivates us to strive for activity, clarity of perceptions and perfection.

Far from such disquiet's being inconsistent with happiness, I find that it is essential to the happiness of created beings; their happiness never consists in complete attainment, which would make them insensate and stupefied, but in continual and uninterrupted progress towards greater goods. Such progress is inevitably accompanied by desire or at least by constant disquiet, but of the kind I have just explained: it does not amount to discomfort, but is restricted to the elements of rudiments of suffering, which we cannot be aware of in themselves but which suffice to act as spurs and to stimulate the will... These appetitions...are truly the first steps... not so much towards happiness as towards joy, since in them one looks only to the present; but experience and reason teach us to govern and moderate them so that they can lead us to happiness (*NE* II, xxi, § 36; *A* VI, 6: 189; *RB*: 189)⁷.

This positive disquiet is an essential part of Leibniz's conception of virtue and it is usually not noticed – virtue and happiness are not just rational actions founded on reflected, distinct knowledge, they

⁶ On Leibniz's doctrine of disinterested love, see Brown (2011) and Roinila (2013).

⁷ Interestingly, in this same point Leibniz compared these spurs to the first motions of the Stoics.

require that certain something which motivates men to promote perfection and love their fellow beings. What is it?

Feeling Perfection

It is perfection, of course. Perfection produces perfection. It is the central motivation in Leibniz's philosophy and in *Essais de théodicée*, § 209 (GP VI: 242) he distinguished between three species of perfection (physical, moral and metaphysical). I will focus in this paper to metaphysical perfection which is a very complex concept (Leibniz frequently described it as the greatest variety together with the greatest order (G VI: 603)) and it is perceived by men as continuity and harmony. Often Leibniz simply said that perceiving perfection is pleasure, for example in this memoir on wisdom:

Pleasure is the feeling of a perfection or an excellence, whether in ourselves or in something else. For the perfection of other beings also is agreeable, such as understanding, courage, and especially beauty in another human being, or in animal or even in a lifeless creation, a painting or a work of craftsmanship, as well. For the image of such perfection in others, impressed upon us, causes some of this perfection to be implanted and aroused within ourselves. Thus there is no doubt that he who consorts with excellent people or things becomes himself more excellent (GP VII: 86, L: 425).

Thus perceiving perfection is connected not only to pleasure, but love, too. Finding perfection in things and people we love arouses perfection in ourselves. While we perceive the perfection clearly, but confusedly, Leibniz also argued that the increase of perceived perfection signifies increase of cognitive distinctness and decrease of perfection signifies increase of cognitive confusion. To see how this can be explained, I think it is useful to look at *Elementa juris naturalis* of 1671:

We seek beautiful things because they are pleasant, for I define beauty as that, contemplation of which is pleasant. Pleasure, however, is doubled by reflection, whenever we contemplate the beauty within ourselves which our conscience makes, not to speak of our virtue ... every mind is something like a mirror, and one mirror is in our mind, another in the mind of someone else. So if there are many mirrors, that is, many minds recognizing our goods, there will be a greater light, the mirrors blending the light not only in the eye but also among each other (A VI, 4: 464; L: 137).

Although Leibniz did not have the doctrine of minute perceptions ready by 1671, this passage fits well with the much later one above. The line of argument seems to me to be that we can combine our own beauty, which is a kind of silent knowledge of our own virtue, with the perfection we perceive. Our own beauty or virtue recognizes the metaphysical perfection in what we perceive, as it is in us through the innate idea of God whose essence is perfection. It is a clear and distinct idea which is combined with the perceived clear, but confused perception of perfection. This idea can perhaps be considered as a memory trace of a former heightened perception of perfection. Leibniz was not very clear on this matter, but it looks to me that the following passage from the same text on wisdom as above supports this reading:

We do not always observe of what the perfection of pleasing things consist, or what kind of perfection within ourselves they serve, yet our character [*Gemüt*] perceives it, even though our understanding does not. We commonly say, "There is something, I know not what, that pleases me in the matter" (*GP VII*: 86; *L*: 425).

Now, if this hypothesis is right, my story would go something like this: when we perceive perfection in another man, we perceive it clearly, but confusedly and we can feel joy. But when this perfection makes us reflect our own perfection, we may recognize the source of this perfection, God, and this presents us with an object for the feeling of joy. At this point we can feel love towards our creator due to his creation and the initial joyful feeling merges to the passion of hope with a clear object. In this point the cognition develops from clear, but confused perception to a clear and distinct perception, for Leibniz argued in *Meditationes* that we can have distinct ideas of some states of the mind, that is, hope and fear (*A VI*, 4: 587). Love is the key element here as it can develop from loving other person to universal love towards God and his creation.

Now unity in plurality is nothing but harmony, and since any particular being agrees with one rather than another being, there flows from this harmony the order from which beauty arises, and beauty awakens love. Thus we see how happiness, pleasure, love, perfection, being, power, freedom, harmony, order, and beauty are all tied to each other, which is properly appreciated by few (*GP VII*: 87; *L*: 426).

In this process the rise of the level of cognition takes place be-

cause the understanding, the “I” that perceives, is aroused and the heightened sense of perfection is apperceived. This, again, motivates men to strive for more of the same and guide their volitions to that goal. In this way the feeling of perfection motivates us to consciously and systematically study God’s creation which gives us an understanding of its structure and informs us of the essence of perfection.

Understanding Perfection

The kind of positive disquiet described above requires moderation as Leibniz said in NE, xxi, § 36. This “trained thinking”, to borrow a concept from Michael Losonsky, is founded on apperceived, clear and distinct knowledge and we can follow the results of these reflections at will⁸. However, in his comments to Descartes’s *Principia philosophiae* Leibniz said that we will only what appears to the intellect (*GP IV*: 361). Therefore the most important requisite for virtue is that we train our thinking in advance. He compared proper thinking to calculation, saying that the remedy for our errors is the same as remedy for errors in calculation: to pay attention to the matter and form, to proceed slowly, to repeat and vary our operations, to introduce tests and checks, to divide longer chains of reasoning into parts and to confirm each part in turn through special proofs (*ibid.*).

However, strong will is also needed, as by our voluntary actions we often indirectly prepare the way for future actions (*NE II*, xxi, § 23; see also § 47). According to Leibniz, the will is a certain appetite in the mind, a conscious striving for an apparent good. This means that the good has to be perceived clearly and distinctly and therefore we cannot perceive perfection at will – it appears to us confusedly in perception (see *NE II*, xx, §6). However, we can and should be motivated by this joyful perception and strive to look for the causes of our joy as shown above.

In deliberation, the confused appetitions, desires or urges may work in two ways: they can stimulate the will, motivate us to strive for the good represented by intellectual pleasure. On the other hand,

⁸ See Losonsky (2001:160-163).

vivid sensual appetitions may cumulate and overcome the will, leading us to acratia behaviour (*NE II*, xxi, §41). Rational thinking requires patience and methodical work and the real goods following from reasonings in deliberation are often present as symbols which do not have an immediate attraction to us. This is why the mind has to be prepared well in advance for temptations.

Confused thoughts often make themselves clearly sensed, whereas our distinct thoughts are usually only potentially clear: they could actually be so if we only applied 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 feelings with are bare words, which are too faint (*NE II*, xxi, § 35; *A VI*, 6: 186-187; *RB*: 186-187).

Virtue and Disquiet

When we are successful in this quest, the virtue or moral goodness eventually follows. It arises from the knowledge and love of God, for it makes us take pleasure in willing as He wills. In other words, we should imitate God in all our actions, since the harmony, goodness and beauty of the world reflect his qualities. The more we can approach this goal, the more we love disinterestedly, the more perfect and active we become. At the same time, our cognition develops towards distinctness:

If we take 'action' to be an endeavour towards perfection, and 'passion' to be the opposite, then genuine substances are active only when their perceptions ... are becoming better developed and more distinct, just as they are passive only when their perceptions are becoming more confused. Consequently, in substances which are capable of pleasure and pain every action is a move towards pleasure, every passion a move towards pain (*NE II*, xxi, § 72; *A VI*, 6: 210; *RB*: 210).

The motivation for virtue comes from the perceived sense of harmony or perfection, but the goal of imitating God, willing as he wills, requires something more, that is, a rational way of life with trained thinking. Thus virtue signifies also improvement in terms of cognitive clarity. We can better resist the confused element in the mind and act by volitions rather than confused appetitions (although moderated disquiet is useful). But this is by no means an easy task. In *Nouveaux essais* II, xxi, § 66 Leibniz listed the essen-

tials for virtuous life:

If we are to make good use of the art of inference, we need an art of bringing things to mind, another of estimating probabilities, and, in addition, knowledge of how to evaluate good and ill; and we need to be attentive, and, on top of all that, to have the patience to carry our calculations through. 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 in our minds (*A VI*, 6: 207; *RB*: 207).

While this may sound like an extremely demanding program, a little later in the same point Leibniz said that “true happiness requires less knowledge but greater strength and goodness of will, so that the dullest idiot can achieve it just as easily as can the cleverest and most educated person” (*A VI*, 6: 207; *RB*: 207). This passage has to be seen in the context of his rhetorics against Locke, but if it is taken seriously, it would seem to suggest that while we can find our way to happiness by reasoning and practising science, we can also follow our natural instinct to pleasure and find out by experience what actions are pleasing to God, as these bring about intellectual pleasure. For this, only strength of will is needed. True virtue and happiness, however, best follows from active promotion of the common good. This requires sustained study of the essence of perfection and an understanding of the best ways to promote it (for example, by practising medicine and justice). It seems to be clear, however, that the less demanding way of following the feeling of perfection and being moral can lead to joy and perhaps to a charitable way of life and happiness in the long run. The positive disquiet, a kind of passionate knowledge or a frame of mind should be enough for this goal. But for a truly virtuous man a readiness for charity or an active state of virtue would seem to have to be a second nature. Paradoxically, her reward and pleasure for following the clear and distinct knowledge and willing as God wills is to have a sense of perfection which is clear, but confused cognition.

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