

Abstracts of Conference Papers and Talks, in order by date.

“Moral Therapy in Princess Elisabeth’s Correspondence with Descartes.” Presented at Lehigh University 5th Annual Philosophy Conference, “Women in Early Modern Philosophy,” October 19 – 20, 2017.

Most of the attention given to Princess Elisabeth’s correspondence with Descartes centers on four main issues: the mind-body interaction problem; the passions; Stoic moral virtue; a sort of moral psychology that can be extracted from these accounts. The latter is concerned mainly with the relationship between physiology and psychology, especially with the moderation of the passion and the attainment of the good life (*vita beata*). What has received little attention, however, is the way in which these discussions occur in the midst of Elizabeth’s physical and psychological suffering, that is, the way in which they contribute to a sort of moral therapy. This concern is expressed in Elisabeth’s very first letter, which closes with an appeal to Descartes as “the best doctor for my soul.” This “care of the soul,” I want to argue, constitutes the character and driving force behind Elisabeth’s objections to Descartes’ frequent oversimplification and underestimation of her concerns.

In the Correspondence, Elisabeth frequently mentions the anxieties related to her domestic and political situation. For example, in a letter describing the “bad humor” of her sick brother, Elisabeth expresses skepticism about Descartes’ frequent reminders simply to “turn away” from the anxieties and to orient “reason” toward attaining “true happiness.” Elisabeth wonders where the will gets its strength to turn, in the face of disease, forceful passions, and frightful misfortunes. She suspects that moral strength is a function, not so much of virtue but of moral luck. However, recognition of our vulnerabilities does not make us weak, she claims, but enables us to recognize that the development of moral virtue is contingent and dependent. This development should not be the cause of regret, but a source of strength.

For Descartes, moral therapy is about developing the right habits, about applying one’s reason to practical matters, prudently and in accord with honor. Elisabeth agrees. But her type of moral therapy is grounded in experience, in particular relationships, and in context. Hers is a moral theory that insists on direct connections among mind, body, and context. For someone living at the center of political turmoil, care of the soul is not so straightforward.

“Leibniz’s Possible Worlds Theodicy: Is this the Best Possible World?” Presentation for the Philosophy Student Society, American University of Beirut, December 2, 2016

17th-Century philosopher Gottfried Leibniz maintained that this world is the best possible world. His claim is based on the general premises that God is perfect and created the world. So, what else could a perfect being do but create the best? However, a quick surmise of our situation would compel any *normal* person to say that this world is very far from being the best. Indeed, as Voltaire’s *Candide* cried out, after witnessing a series of horrors, “if this is the best possible world, what are the others like?” Today, we need only to observe our war-torn situation next door.

Such ready dismissals reveal, however, that the metaphysical and metaethical premises of Leibniz’s conception are not well understood; but if they were, they just *might* serve as plausible defenses of God’s justice—or theodicy. In this talk I will present a philosophically rich account of Leibniz’s conception of ‘best possible world,’ in defense of God’s “perfections.” Afterward, we will be in the best possible position to decide whether his account satisfies a possible theodicy—that is, whether it contributes positively to a solution to the problem of evil.

“Kant’s Criticism of Leibniz on the Two Sources of Cognition,” presented at the American Philosophical Association conference, Washington DC, January, 2016

Kant claims that Leibniz fails to distinguish two sources of cognition: sensible and intelligible. By characterizing the senses as “confused perceptions” and reducing cognition to intelligible “clarity” only, Leibniz was led to mistake appearances for things in themselves. Commentators have since shown that Leibniz in fact acknowledges and distinguishes the two sources. However, I show that Kant’s criticism is really directed at Leibniz’s failure to recognize that the transcendental categories of experience, namely the a priori intuition of space and the concepts of identity and difference, are subjectively constitutive of experience. So it is this failure, not the failure to distinguish two sources of cognition, that led Leibniz to mistake appearances for things in themselves. This clarifies an important difference between the epistemology of the two philosophers (especially in regard to their respective conceptions of space).

“Leibniz and the Square: A Deontic Logic for the *Vir Bonus*.” Paper presented at 3rd World-Congress on the Square of Opposition, American University of Beirut, June 26 – 30, 2012.

17th century philosopher Gottfried Leibniz’s contributions to metaphysics, mathematics, and logic are well known. Lesser known is his “invention” of deontic logic, and that his invention is based on the Aristotelian square of opposition. Only relatively recently have contemporary deontologists, e.g., von Wright (1951), Kowlinowski and J-L Gardies (1974) and Bailhache recognized Leibniz as the inventor of deontic logic. But we can find Leibniz first sketching out this logic, or what he himself called the “modes of right” (*juris modalia*), in his *Elements of Natural Law* of 1671. This sketch formed part of a larger attempt to establish what he called a ‘science of natural right,’ which he maintained would contain in its entirety the *a priori* principles upon which all of morality and law would be correctly established.

Nevertheless, the relation of his deontology to the whole of his science of right remains unclear. My main point in this paper, aside from showing how Leibniz invented deontic logic based on the Aristotelian square, is to make clear this relationship, by showing how Leibniz grounds a central deontic concept, namely *obligation*, in the human capacity for freedom. This claim is part of a larger argument of mine to show that the consequentialist elements of Leibniz’s moral philosophy were built up from a deontic foundation.

“The Role of Striving and Discord in Kant’s Ideal of Moral Perfection.” Presented at the “Conference on Ideals and the Ideal in Kant.” Bogazici University, Istanbul, Turkey, May 23-26, 2012.

Kant’s conception of moral perfection is that of a will whose primary incentive is that of duty. Yet moral perfection demands much more than simply *performance* according to this incentive, since Kant also holds it is our moral duty to develop the internal *disposition*, the virtue, or the constant and steady will, to act from this incentive. Furthermore, not only is the development of this disposition a general end that is also a duty, i.e., a type of self-perfection; but the possession of such a disposed will is an *ideal* that pure practical reason sets before us—as the perfect or “holy will.” Indeed this ideal leads Kant, in the *Critique of Practical Reason*, to postulate the immortality of the soul: since moral perfection is impossible to attain in this life, we must postulate its possibility in a continued existence; otherwise, the duty to attain moral perfection would be in conflict with itself, since we cannot rationally strive for an impossible end. With the endless duration of the same rational personality, however, we may hope to make “endless progress” toward that ideal end.

What is too little noticed in this account, however, is that striving and discord are necessary components, not only of moral virtue, but of the very moral worth of an action, for Kant, and thus unavoidable components of this “endless progress,” toward the ideal. In this paper, I wish to show how the postulate of immortality appears much less “necessary” than is typically assumed, since the moral

worth of moral of an action does not consist in the *attainment* of its ideal, but rather in the possibility of constant striving.

“Deontic Foundations in Leibniz’s Practical Philosophy.” APA Eastern Division Conference, Colloquium session, Philadelphia, PA, Dec. 27-30, 2008.

It is widely recognized that Leibniz’s practical philosophy is firmly grounded in teleological principles (perfection and happiness), affective factors (pleasure and love), as well as intellectual virtues (knowledge, wisdom). Indeed, Leibniz defines *wisdom*, as “the science of happiness” and *justice* ultimately as “the charity of the wise person.” In this paper, however, I argue that Leibniz’s practical philosophy is grounded in the deontic categories of *right* and *obligation*. These categories, introduced in one of Leibniz’s earliest works, *Nova Methodus* (1667), denote the *moral qualities* of a rational substance, i.e., the moral power and moral necessity of a person to act justly. I go on to show that from this deontic, *a priori* foundation Leibniz derives material rights and obligations, the requirements of public utility, as well as his well-known three precepts of right. I claim that Leibniz’s practical philosophy cannot be properly understood, without recognizing this, rather overlooked, deontic foundation.

Abstracts of papers given as informal talks:

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17th-Century philosopher Gottfried Leibniz maintained that this world is the best possible world. His claim is based on the general premises that God is perfect and created the world. So, what else could a perfect being do but create the best? However, a quick surmise of our situation would compel any *normal* person to say that this world is very far from being the best. Indeed, as Voltaire’s *Candide* cried out, after witnessing a series of horrors, “if this is the best possible world, what are the others like?” Today, we need only to observe our war-torn situation next door.

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“Aristotle and Leibniz on Pleasure, Love, and Justice.” American University of Beirut, November 25, 2010.

Originally, the title of my talk was to be something like “The moral grounds of political justice in Leibniz.” But that topic struck me as rather dull for a relatively informal talk, and I wanted something sexier. In fact, I considered calling it, “The Sexy Grounds of Justice,” but I thought that might not be professional enough. So, after thinking more about it, I realized that I could talk about things like pleasure and love, which are sexy, and connected with justice. As a result, I’d have to include Aristotle, who, admittedly, was not known to be sexy, but does mention sex. Leibniz does not mention sex and even seems never to have had it—which is curious, given the esteem he places on pleasure, as we will see.

My philosophical reason for discussing these philosophers on these topics is to try to understand how, and if, Leibniz resolves a problem about justice. That problem, simply put, is to resolve the apparent conflict between two theses he wishes to maintain:

(A) Psychological egoism: As a fact of our psychology, it is not possible to act other than for one's own good (even when we do act for the sake of another's good, our own good must be involved).

(B) Justice requires (at least sometimes) that we act for the good of another at our own expense.

I argue that to resolve the conflict Leibniz must utilize an Aristotelian conception of pleasure; namely, that pleasure not the *end sought* in acts of justice, but rather pleasure is the *result* of an act of justice which is sought for its own sake.