My Response to Gregory Brown’s article.

Recently, I found an article (or review, perhaps) critical of my main argument for Leibniz’s theory of moral obligation and motivation (which I had set out in my book and several articles). The article, “Leibniz on the Ground of Moral Normativity and Obligation,” (*The Leibniz Review*, Dec. 2016) is by Gregory Brown, Professor of Philosophy at the University of Houston and well-known Leibniz commentator. In addition to offering a high number of critical remarks, Brown argues for his own interpretation of Leibniz’s moral theory, one that is based on the idea that motivation and moral obligation are fundamentally egoist and hedonist, yet ultimately other-regarding. I recognize that Brown is an accomplished scholar and highly knowledgeable about Leibniz. He has been publishing on Leibniz since well before I started college, and I have benefitted from his work.

However, with a few exceptions, I think his article contains a number of mistakes or misunderstandings, as well as some unfair characterizations of my interpretation. On one hand, this does not surprise me, since my interpretation is to some extent in fundamental disagreement with Brown’s, with what I refer to as the “standard interpretation.” But I argue that it needs to be supplemented (not replaced) with what I call Leibniz’s “science of right,” which says that moral obligation is grounded in *a priori* principles of natural right, independently of (what I take to be) psychophysical motives, including ego-hedonist desires. In no way do I deny that psychophysical motives are important or efficacious. But I do claim that (Leibniz also held) we can be motivated by the recognition of a priori principles, independently of consideration of our own good, and that we must be so capable, if our actions are to be considered just. Brown thinks that Leibniz maintains that we can only be motivated deliberately by consideration of one’s own good. I think that we have an interesting philosophical disagreement on this; so, I wish to clarify my position, in case others find the issue interesting.

Since *The Leibniz Review* has not asked me to submit a response, and since it does not accept unsolicited submissions, I decided to post my response on my website. I understand that doing philosophy means putting your ideas out there only to have them criticized; this is the way of progress! So, I hope my response will be taken in that spirit. But please note that I am busy with other projects, so I don’t wish to devote too much time to a full onslaught of textual analysis. To my mind, I already did that in my book and articles. So, I feel disinclined to repeat the same points or to state them in a way that a critic might find convincing. Nevertheless, I hope this brief “defense” is charitable to the prosecutor and clear enough to convince the reader.

**Here is how I will proceed. First,** (1) a general statement of my main claims and intentions, as contained in my published work on Leibniz; then (2) a focus on the problem of whether and how for Leibniz an agent can act independently of being motivated by a pleasure. This problem centrally involves whether Leibniz’s account of “disinterested love” solves the problem of justice, that is, whether it is possible to act both for the sake of one’s own good as well as another’s. I argue that Leibniz’s account doesn’t work, while Brown seems to think it does. I will touch on the question of whether being motivated by pleasure can be “obligatory.”

First (1), I am offering an interpretation of Leibniz’s moral theory that is perhaps more speculative than most. The main reason for this is that I am trying to give his moral theory the substance that his writings on jurisprudence seem to suggest, and not much work has been done in this regard (aside from by Gaston Grua and Patrick Riley). I am also trying to give Leibniz’s moral theory the substance I think it needs. Truthfully, I have often found it, as it has been traditionally understood, rather empty of specific moral content. It is largely full of non-specific platitudes about pleasure and happiness, some advice about how to increase it (be virtuous, imitate God), about love and when we find it (when it is pleasant to us!), general remarks about “the good,” “perfection,” and when it is increased, and justice as “charity of the wise,” without saying much about which sort of actions count as loving or perfect, or more importantly, which sort of actions we are specifically *obligated* to perform, and exactly why. I find in Leibniz, and in Brown’s work on it, a description of *how* we are motivated to love someone, and a recommendation that we do so; but no true *obligation* to do so. I do not find “be good because it will bring you happiness” a moral obligation to be good. I find especially lacking what I think any substantial moral theory needs to include, namely, that we are obligated to love, i.e., to act benevolently, even when we get no pleasure from doing so. I take it to be obvious that we can do this. I take it to be axiomatic that we act deliberately, intentionally, only in accord with what we perceive to be good—but that does not at all entail that the good we perceive must be our own good. I take it necessary that we be capable of acting justly for its own sake. Getting Leibniz to say this is, I admit, very challenging.

I argue that a true account of obligation, one that Leibniz can agree with, cannot depend on a constant conformity with one’s desires, but requires certain *limits* on what one desires. I don’t find this point controversial. And I do not mean limits that are merely prudential, in the sense that reason serves to provide us with better sentiments. I mean that reason tells us that certain actions are to be done and not done because they are right or wrong. At the same time, these constraining reasons do result in greater happiness for ourselves and others—it’s just that for those actions to count as truly just, they must be done for the sake of justice, equality, fairness, or equity. I find these claims consistent with Leibniz’s positions, especially in his early work in the *New Method on Learning and Teaching Jurisprudenc*e (especially in the parts I was the first to translate into English). Again, I find it completely uncontroversial but also very important to maintain that we are capable of performing actions that are morally right, but yet make us *unhappy* to do so. And I think that Leibniz, though he does not say so, *can* say so, if we pay close attention to what his “science of right” in the *New Method* actually says and reasonably implies, and how these ideas shape his thinking in later texts, and/or, how they can, even when he does not attend sufficiently to them.

I think that if a moral theory does not include an account of how we can act independently of our own pleasure, then it is not very interesting. And since I take Leibniz to be very intelligent, I figure that he does not always mean what he says, or that, given other commitments, he must mean something else, because, if he did not then he would not have an interesting or substantial moral theory. I readily admit at times to reading more into Leibniz than what he explicitly says, and that the “data set” as Brown puts it, is thin. However, I maintain that my interpretation is consistent with Leibniz’s *considered* views, as well as with what *would* be consistent with his views, had he considered them further*.* I should hope that the data set, though in my view much thicker than Brown thinks, would inspire some new ideas and approaches to Leibniz’s moral theory. I’d like to think it is more complex than most commentators have acknowledged

 I would also like to point out a methodological difference from Brown. I interpret a text as a whole. I avoid skipping around, filling in a spot here and there with some brief remark made 10 or 20 years later, or backfilling with a remark made 20 years prior, regardless of who Leibniz was talking to or what his intention might have been, as if Leibniz is everywhere making the same argument. I try to work out what I think Leibniz’s argument is, *or what it needs to be*, within its immediate context. So, for example, when Leibniz claims that “to love is to find pleasure in the happiness of another,” I do not explain what this means by appealing to Leibniz’s later definition, “to love is to find pleasure in the *perfection* of another,” because finding happiness and perfection are related, but *distinct* sorts of things to find, by which to be motivated to act, a difference that makes a significant moral difference, especially once the content of perfection is fleshed out. Leibniz’s dependency on pleasure in this account is part of the reason I think it fails in the earlier text. Or, if I claim that Leibniz and Pufendorf have likely similar views in 1670 on the relationship between moral qualities and free will, but you claim they cannot agree on that in 1670 because in 1704 they disagree on the grounds of an obligation, that is not an argument against their agreement in 1670. I do, however, claim that the “science of right” that he first established at an early stage informs and shapes some of his later developments. For example, I argued that his notion of “moral necessity” in *Theodicy* is essentially the same as it is in the early *Nova Methodus* (essentially the same, not identical). I argued (Chapter 5 of my book) that even so the contexts are quite different and his aims have broadened, a core meaning of moral necessity remains and helps to explain what it means in the new context. I plan to say more about this relationship in a future article.

Anyway, here is my basic claim, generally stated: that there is a deontological component to Leibniz’s moral theory. That means that individuals have certain rights and obligations, grounded in reasons independent of consequentialism, i.e., grounded, made possible by, their capacity for free-will. This does not mean that consequentialism doesn’t play a role in Leibniz’s moral theory. But what I claim is that the consequentialist reasons (happiness, social utility, perfection) for acting rightly derive from the deontological constraints of what Leibniz calls (in the *New Method*) the “moral qualities of right and obligation.” These qualities I characterize (or I interpret) as capacities for free willing and moral action. In short, I call them capacities for *self-limitation*, capacities I take to be essential to being a moral agent. Specifically, these capacities are the freedom to move one’s body, to obtain possessions, and to form social agreements (compacts) that are legitimized (licensed) by the rights to freedom and possession. From these moral qualities, I argue that Leibniz derives, in a quasi-demonstrative way, the “three degrees” of natural right: Harm no one, give to each his due, and act honorably, where ‘act honorably’ means ‘act for the sake of justice.’ I take these to be self-constraining obligations, since they are based on rational capabilities, not on divine commands, egoism, pleasure, happiness, or perfection. I claim that Leibniz established these principles on an *a priori* basis, i.e., from definitions of the terms of right (*jus*), independently of psychophysical motives such as egoistic pleasure and pain.

Then I claim that in the set of texts called (in English) *Elements of Natural Right* (hereafter ENR) the consequentialist motives and ends, such as pleasure and happiness, are not *justifications* for acting rightly, but only *motivations* for acting rightly. I claim that we misunderstand Leibniz’s moral theory when we fail to distinguish moral justification from these motivations. I then show that the moral qualities become the *virtues* of the “good man,” who is defined as “one who loves everyone.” And then I show what Leibniz takes to be a “demonstration” of this definition, one that leads to the definition of pleasure as “the perception of harmony,” and harmony as “diversity compensated by identity.” In the midst of this argument I show how we can be motivated to act benevolently, without being motivated by our own good (conceived here as the pleasure found in the happiness of another--this is the main point of contention for Brown, to which I will return, below). Notably, there is no reference whatsoever to *perfection* in this text (the ENR), nor to the idea that we are *obligated* to increase another’s pleasure. We are, however, obligated not to harm anyone, including ourselves. We are also obligated, whether it pleases us or not, to help others, to decrease their misery and increase their happiness, because *that’s what it means to be jus*t, i.e., a good person who loves everyone. In sum, I argue, through an extensive analysis of Leibniz’s definitions in the ENR, that Leibniz derives the definition of the “good man” as “one who loves everyone” *from* the a priori definitions of right and obligation as moral powers. I do not say that Leibniz succeeds in the demonstration, but I say that this is how he conceived of the science of right. In this sense, the science of right, or of duty, is established independently of psycho-physical features of rational agents, such as their attraction to and aversion from pleasures and pains. I also argue that although these claims were established early in Leibniz’s career, they influenced his thought in later texts, such as *The Codex*, “On the Principles of Pufendorf,” “Meditation on the Common Concept of Justice,” *Theodicy*, and in his ultimate definition of justice as “the love of the wise person.” In this way, Leibniz provides deontic constraints upon the consequentialist components: happiness and perfection. Brown claims that the science of right is *instrumental* to happiness and perfection. I deny this, because the science of right is *constitutive* of happiness and perfection. I would not say that one is the instrument of the other, but rather, as Leibniz says repeatedly, and as Brown well knows, utility and honor cannot be separated.

Now, (2) let me turn to Brown’s most important, frequent, and substantial criticism: that I am mistaken to say that for Leibniz an agent *can* act independently of her desires. That is because Leibniz maintains, nay, insists, that an agent can *only* be motivated by her own good, that is, by that which she finds pleasant to her. (To be accurate, as Brown notes, and I’m happy to comply, *an agent can act deliberately only according to what she perceives to be her own good*.) This is a crucial point, because it determines whether it is possible for an agent to act *justly*, since, as Leibniz has it, to act justly is to act for the good of *another*. The astute reader will notice that it is difficult to reconcile both requirements, for, if to act justly an agent must act for the good of another, yet, in order to act at all, she can act only according to what she perceives to be her own good, it appears impossible to act justly. The difficulty is even more interesting, since Leibniz thinks that his account of “disinterested love” (not called that in the ENR) solves the problem. So, when I claim that Leibniz must think it is possible to act (i.e., to be motivated) independently of one’s own good, I appear to be saying, according to Brown, something patently false for Leibniz, but also, I would fail to explain how acting justly is possible for Leibniz.

So, the heart of the matter for Brown, and for me, is whether Leibniz’s account of disinterested love is coherent, and this depends on the role *pleasure* plays in this account. Brown cites textual evidence to the effect that Leibniz was a “motivational hedonist.” He draws his evidence from several passages, notably from the much later *Theodicy* and *New Essays*. But for now, I want to focus on what Leibniz says in the earlier ENR, since this is the main locus of contention. As Brown correctly quotes Leibniz: “there is no one who deliberately does anything except on account of his own good” (B 48). What could be more clear? Leibniz then wonders how anyone can act justly, since to act justly is to act for *another’s* good. His answer is that we can do both, when we consider the nature of love: “we love those whose happiness pleases us” (B 49). The basic idea here is that when we love someone, we get immediate pleasure from their happiness (*not* from their *perfection—*Leibniz says nothing about perfection in the ENR). And so this immediate pleasure figures centrally as the “disinterested motive.” When we take immediate pleasure in another’s happiness, we find *our* good (which is pleasure) in *their* good. Thus, supposedly, we are moved to act for our own good, as well as the other’s, and thus, we act justly.

Now, I have given a very brief account of a very complicated argument, and if you are not convinced by it, I urge you to read Brown’s article yourself, but more so his 2011 article (“Disinterested Love: Understanding Leibniz’s Reconciliation of Self-and-Other-Regarding Motives”), in which he sets out Leibniz’s argument in the ENR in painstaking detail, while correcting Loemker’s well-known translation. A more succinct explanation can be found in his contribution to the Continuum Companion to Leibniz. But if you are *still* not convinced by the Brown-Leibniz account, as I am not, then you might consider an alternative, such as I offered in Chapter Two of my book. There I claimed that Leibniz could not mean what he says because it doesn’t work, for two reasons: One, it does not explain why or how we should find pleasure in another’s happiness. Leibniz just says, without argument, that we do and that’s what love is. But this is surely puzzling, since, if I am motivated only for my own good, then *I don’t care* about anyone’s happiness but mine; so, it is unclear why I should get pleasure from anyone else’s happiness. Secondly, suppose I do find pleasure in the other’s happiness, and this motivates me to act justly, since a just act will increase the other’s happiness. It still seems to me that I am acting for the sake of the *pleasure* I find in the other’s happiness, rather than acting for the other’s good, thus for the sake of justice. So, I offer a way for Leibniz to make it work, although I must say I am not confident that it works. Very briefly, since Leibniz says that a just act is done for the sake of another’s good, then I think we have to say that one’s motive in a just act must be to do good for another—otherwise, it is not a just act. But then how can we be motivated to act, if, as Leibniz requires, we can act only on account of a perceived good for us? I think this is possible, only if the pleasure we get is not the *motive* for our action—but only the *result* of our acting justly. In other words, pleasure is the by-product of acting justly, as it is the by-product, not the end, of all of our activities. So, we still *get* pleasure in just acts; we just do not act on account of the pleasure we get. The important difference, admittedly slight, is in the *aim* of our action, which is justice, not pleasure. I think at this point Leibniz had not fully developed his solution to the problem of reconciling justice with one’s own good, so instead he makes the argument, natural enough, that we must be moved by pleasure to act justly. I suspect that he did not really think that his own account worked, because in fact he later changed his definition of love (more below).

 I should like to state additional reasons why Leibniz’s account of disinterested love in the ENR provides a very poor account of *obligation*. Suppose I do not find pleasure in someone’s happiness. Suppose I do not love them. Am I excused from my obligation to treat them fairly? No. So, what obligates me to treat someone fairly? The answer is what the rules of justice require. But suppose I find no pleasure in acting justly, or in fulfilling my obligations to my fellow. How then will I be motivated to act justly? Not by pleasure, but by the thought that it is right that I act in such a way. Otherwise, I am doing it on account of the pleasure I get. Admittedly, acting justly for its own sake is hard and is going to take some practice, until I develop the habit and disposition to be so motivated, until I find the pleasure that naturally accompanies justice, *when I act for the sake of justice*. In the meantime, *I am not motivated by the pleasure*, and yet I am obligated to act justly. Further, supposing I take pleasure in the happiness of another, doesn’t their happiness have to be a *moral* happiness? For example, suppose my beloved finds happiness in kicking babies. What sort of pleasure should I get from that? What sort of justice shall I show her? These questions are not well answered by considering which sorts of pleasures will be motivationally efficacious. Nor are they well answered by appealing to an agent’s fears of eternal damnation, as Brown even admits. No, these questions are best answered by considering what sort of actions are harmful, equitable, reciprocal, or what sort of actions promote social utility, and what sort of actions a universal community of rational minds would take to be right as well as beneficial, independently of the pleasure that they might (or might not) bring. I think this is Leibniz’s better answer, despite the emphasis he places on motives of love, as well as divine fear and hope. So, in sum, I think Leibniz’s account of disinterested love in the ENR fails miserably as an account of moral justification. What it needs is his science of right.

But let me try to advance my position by citing evidence that Brown (in his criticism of mine) takes to be evidence for *his* position. This comes from the preface to the Mantissa Codex of 1700 (30 years after the ENR). Here Leibniz disagrees with those who say that it is “more perfect” to submit to the will of God, rather than to one’s own delight:

“But it must be understood that this conflicts with the nature of things, for the endeavor to act [*conatus agendi*] arises from a striving [*tendendo*] for perfection, the perception of which is pleasure; otherwise there is no action or will. And even with regard to ill-advised decisions, we are moved by a certain perceived appearance of good or perfection, even if we miss the goal, or rather pay for an ill-sought, trifling good by throwing away a greater; *nor is it possible to renounce, more than verbally*, *being impelled by one’s own good without at the same time renouncing one’s own nature* (B 27, Brown’s emphasis).

Brown claims that this and several other passages show that Leibniz was a motivational hedonist, i.e., that it is impossible to act deliberately except in accord with what one perceives to be good for oneself, where ‘the good’ is that which one takes to be pleasant. It would be against our very nature to act otherwise. No mistaking that last italicized sentence, right? Thus, Brown says I am wrong to claim that for Leibniz we can be motivated to act independently of our own desires, especially the desire for our own pleasure.

But if you look closely at this passage, you can get a quite different interpretation. Notice that the first sentence says that the endeavor to act arises from a striving for perfection, *not* a striving for pleasure. The pleasure *follows* as a consequence of this striving. The next sentence makes this point even more clearly: “we are moved by a certain perceived appearance of good or perfection.” It does *not* say that we are moved by the *pleasure* that results from the perception of perfection; rather, we are moved by the perception of the perfection. That is, we are not moved by pleasure, nor by our desire for the pleasant thing, but by the perception of perfection. Thus, I find it quite reasonable to say, and for Leibniz to mean, that we can be motivated to act independently of our desires, where ‘desire’ is conceived as a striving for pleasure, or, for the pleasant thing. *What we strive for, rather, is perfection*, and when we do, *pleasure is the consequence*. Thus, in the last sentence, “one’s own good” need not be understood as ‘pleasure’ (as Brown often construes ‘the good’) but rather as one’s perfection. This is the natural motive that we cannot renounce or act independently of. I suspect this explains why Leibniz changed his definition of love in the ENR (1672) to “finding pleasure in the *perfection* of another” (“On Felicity” 1694). What we are moved by, at least initially, is the perfection of another, not the pleasure that results from their perfection. No doubt pleasure motivates! I’m not denying that at all. I’m just saying it’s not the only thing that does, nor is it the primary motive, nor is it the *correct* motive. This is what Leibniz needs to say explicitly.

Now, does this mean that we can act independently of our own desires? Perhaps that is too loosely formulated. What I mean is that we are motivated to act according to the perception of some good, independently of the pleasure we find in some pleasant thing. So, I would say that in the ENR, Leibniz *should* say (since he does not speak of perfection there) that we are motivated to act according to the perception of *justice*, rather than pleasure, because pleasure is the result of the perception of justice. And that is basically what I say. The function of pleasure is only to encourage us to act rightly, although this encouragement must always be tempered by reason. In this way Leibniz’s substitution of pleasure for perfection in his later definition of love makes more sense: Just acts are acts that perfect both our own and another’s nature, because our nature is to seek perfection. And so when we perceive perfection, i.e., when we perceive an increase in reason, knowledge, skill, moral happiness and moral power, in effect, justice, whether in ourselves or in others, we are moved to act justly. That’s what love is. This account also coincides better with Leibniz’s overall perfectionist ontology.

It is nevertheless true that Leibniz often sounds like a motivational hedonist. For example, where Brown cites Leibniz in this partial sentence from the *New Essays*: “in substances which are capable of pleasure and pain every action is an advance toward pleasure and every passion an advance toward pain” (NE 210). But look at the first part of this sentence:

 “if we take ‘action’ to be an endeavor towards perfection, and ‘passion’ to be the opposite, then genuine substances are active only when their perceptions are becoming better developed and more distinct. Consequently, in substances which are capable of pleasure and pain every action is a move towards pleasure, every passion a move towards pain.”

Rather than evidence for motivational hedonism, this illustrates motivational intellectualism. Clearly, action aims for perfection, and the clearer the perception of the perfection, the more active the agent is. Thus, insofar as we correctly perceive a perfection, pleasure follows. If we are *obligated* to do anything here, and by the way this says nothing about obligation, it is to increase the clarity of our perceptions—to cognize correctly what is the right thing to do—not, however, to increase pleasure, even so pleasure *will* increase with an increase in correct cognition. This is the sense in which reason is instrumental—it instructs us on what perfection is, on how to increase it, not on how to increase perfection in order to increase our own pleasure or anyone else’s.

Leibniz says, and Brown agrees, and so do I, that the perfect moral agent is one who finds pleasure in just acts (see *Meditation* of 1702). But I think this cannot mean that the agent acts for the sake of the pleasure she gets from acting justly, for that would destroy the meaning of ‘acting justly,’ conceived as another’s good. Yet there is no folly in this, nor psychophysical impossibility. Perhaps Leibniz should say that the perfect moral agent finds *satisfaction* in acting justly; but the aim must remain to act justly. If so, then we can act independently of (at least some of) our desires.

If this tells us what it means to be rightly motivated, what does it say about obligation? I would still wish to flesh out further the meaning of perfection as an increase in the freedom of rational substances, which entails that they have self-imposed limits on their actions. These self-imposed limits would constitute their obligations. Again, I think you can do this with Leibniz’s science of right, and I think this is a more interesting account of moral obligation, than is a lot of happy talk about a community of disinterested lovers increasing each other’s perfections into perpetuity.

What I’ve said may not be enough to convince Brown that I am not wrong to say that Leibniz believes we can act independently of our desires. But my point is actually quite simple: When we love, whether in terms of romance, family, friendship, or political association, we often must do things that, for them to count as loving, are very unpleasant, in which our immediate and long-term desires must be set aside and compromised. I would find it hard to believe that Leibniz would disagree. I would find it hard to believe that he thinks that the only way we can do these things is somehow to find pleasure in them, or even to find *our own* good in them. The pleasure that accompanies virtue, that makes virtue its own reward, is real, although as Leibniz knows, this sort of pleasure is very, very slight. And yet he must believe that we are capable of acting virtuously anyway, that the most virtuous agent is one who acts on this “spiritual disposition,” the disposition for justice for its very own sake. But there is much more work to do on Leibniz’s account.

That’s all I have time to say right now. Apologies if I misrepresented anything. I found it too time-consuming to address Professor Brown’s many other criticisms. Actually, I found them rather exhausting and somewhat annoying. But I may make additional responses from time to time. So, watch this space!

Christopher Johns

American University of Beirut