LEIBNIZ' PRINCIPLE OF SUFFICIENT REASON

I propose to consider in this paper one of Leibniz' principles which according to him is "basic to his entire system",[1] namely, the principle of sufficient reason. Unfortunately it is not easy to say what precisely the principle is, for, it seems to have been given different formulations at different stages in Leibniz' thoughts. In some places he speaks of it as if he regarded it as coordinate with the principle of contradiction, governing the truth of necessary propositions. But in some other places he appears to suggest that the principle of sufficient reason is nothing else than his definition of truth, (viz. that in all true propositions the predicate is contained in the subject); and seems to treat it as the governing principle of all propositions, necessary as well as contingent. And there are passages in which there is a suggestion that the principle of sufficient reason is the same as the principle of perfection or of the best. The result of these bewildering variety of statements is that there is a lot of dispute among the scholars of Leibniz as to what this principle is. We shall begin by stating different views, citing passages in support of each, and try to see if we can arrive at some satisfactory conclusion.

The first impression which one naturally has of the principle is that it is the principle governing contingent propositions, just as the principle of contradiction is the governing principle of all necessary propositions. The following are some of the statements which support this impression. In *The Principles of Nature and of Grace* he says, "Up till now we have spoken as *physicists* merely; now we must rise to *metaphysics* making use of the *great principle*, commonly but little employed, which holds that *nothing takes place without sufficient reason*, that is to say, that nothing happens without its being possible for one who has enough knowledge of things to a reason sufficient to determine why it is thus and not otherwise. The principle having

been laid down, the first question we are entitled to ask will be: *Why is there something rather than nothing?* For, 'nothing' is simpler and easier than 'something'. Further, supposing that things must exist, it must be possible to give a reason why they must exist just as they do and not otherwise." (Sec. 7). In the *Correspondence with Clarke*, he says, "The great foundation of mathematics is *the principle of contradiction or of identity* ... And this single principle is enough to prove the whole of arithmetic and the whole of geometry, that is to say, all mathematical principles. But in order to proceed from mathematics to physics another principle is necessary, ... that is, *the principle of sufficient reason*, that nothing happens without there being a reason why it should be thus and not otherwise". (*Second Letter to Clarke*, sec. 9, G.[2] VII, P. 355) The paras 31, 32, and 36 from his *Monadology* express the same view.

But a different view is suggested by the following passages quoted by Couturat. "The fundamental principle of reasoning is that *nothing of devoid of reason*, or, to be more explicit, that there is no truth unsupported by *reason*. And this *reason* of truth consists in the connection of the predicate with the subject either manifestly, as in the identical propositions, or, in a hidden way, such however that this containing may be revealed by the analysis of their notions". (*Opuscules*, p. 11). A similar statement appears in one of his letters to Arnauld in which he says, "There must always be, for the connection of the terms of a proposition, a foundation which must be found in their notions. This is my great principle ... the corrollary of which is the commonplace axiom that nothing happens without a reason" (G II, p. 56), and again in another letter in regard to the connection between the subject and the predicate he says, "... I do not mean any other connection between subject and predicate than that which is to be found in most contingent truths, that is to say, there is always something to be conceived in the subject which provides the explanation why this predicate or this event belongs to it, or why a particular event happened rather than not". (*Letter to*

Arnaul, May, 1686). The following passage suggests the same view. Leibniz says, "In demonstration I use two principles, of which one that what implies a contradiction is false; the other is that a reason can be given for every truth (which is not identical or immediate), i.e. that the notion of the predicate is always expressly or implicitly contained in the subject, and *this holds good no less in extrinsic than in intrinsic denominations, no less in contingent than in necessary truths*". (G. VII, p. 199, — italics mine). To be sure, the principle of sufficient reason is not expressly mentioned in these passages. But the expression 'a reason can be given for every truth' which is the formula that invariably occurs in the enunciation of the principle of sufficient reason in most of Leibniz' passages, leaves little doubt that it is the principle of sufficient reason that is being spoken of here. If this is correct, then the principle of sufficient reason simply states the nature of truth in general (viz. the view that in all true propositions the predicate is contained in the subject). Russell, while commenting on Couturat's view, remarks that "The principle of sufficient reason ... asserts simply that every true proposition is analytic, and is the exact converse of the law of contradiction which asserts that every analytic proposition is true" (*A Critical Exposition of the Philosophy of Leibniz, Preface to the Second Edition*, p. iii). This would make the principle of sufficient reason the principle of *all* propositions — necessary as well as contingent. But if the principle of sufficient reason were the principle of all the propositions, there would be need of two more principles one for necessary propositions, and the other for the contingent ones. And in fact there *are* two such principles: the principle of contradiction for the necessary, and the principle of the best for the contingent propositions. The principle of the best is spoken of as the principle of contingency in several passages. Consider, for example, the following passages: "There are two first principles of all reasonings, the principle of contradiction ... and the principle that a reason must be given to every proposition, which is not known *per se*, has an *a priori* proof or that a reason can be

given for every truth, or, as is commonly said, that nothing happens without a cause. In the marginal note Leibniz remarks: The true cause why certain things exist rather than others, is to be derived from the free decree of divine will, the first of which is, to will to do all things in the best possible way" (G. VII, p. 309). Consider again the following passage: "... All contingent propositions have reasons for being as they are rather than otherwise ... which render them certain and show that the connection of the subject and predicate in these propositions has its foundation in the nature of one and the other, but they do not have the demonstrations of necessity, since these reasons are only founded on the principle of contingency, or of the existence of things, i.e. what is or appears the best among several equally possible things, whereas the necessary truths are founded on the principle of contradiction and on the possibility and impossibility, of essences themselves without regard in this to the free will of God or of creatures". (G. IV, p. 438, *Discourse*, Sec. 13). These passages suggest that the reason for the truth of contingent propositions is the principle of the best which is described by Leibniz himself as the principle of contingency.

From the various kinds of statements each professing to be the principle of sufficient reason, it becomes clear that it cannot be decided clearly which of these is the Leibnizian doctrine. Let us call the principle that in all true propositions the predicate is included in the subject, the principle of truth. Then the question is: Is the principle of sufficient reason the same as the principle of truth? If not, then what is it?

Of the commentators, Russell's view is different from all the rest. He thinks that the principle of sufficient reason is the principle that every contingent proposition has its ground in the final cause. Then there can be no doubt that this is the principle which Leibniz regards as self-evident, and also that his metaphysics requires it. Russell is of the opinion that the principle of sufficient reason as understood by Leibniz is really two principles: a wider one which ap-

plies to all contingents, possible and actual; and the narrower one which applies to actual contingents alone. The wider principle states that every existent has a sufficient reason in the sense of a final cause, whereas the narrower principle states *what* this final cause is. This latter principle, according to Russell, is the same as what Leibniz calls the principle of the best. The rationale of the wider principle seems to be as follows: What actually exists is contingent, i.e. it is possible that it might not have existed. Now the reason which can account for the existence of contingent must be one which in Leibniz' famous phrase, "inclines but does not necessitate". The reasons which have this character are the free decrees of the free beings. So we can account for the existence of contingent things by regarding them as the results of purpose or design. The principle of sufficient reason in its wider application simply states that all contingents have reasons in the sense of designs. But this principle thus understood applies actually to possible as well as to the actual contingents. For a contingent, whether actual or possible, must be looked upon as grounded in some design. Thus we require something more to account for the contingents which actually exist. This principle, Russell says, is that God always acts for the best, which is called by Leibniz the principle of the best. It is because the actual world is the best possible that God created it in preference to other infinite number of possible worlds.

Let us enumerate here all the principles which have been used by Leibniz in his system. Though he says that in demonstration he uses two principles, he actually uses four principles at least, and these are (1) The Principle of Contradiction, (2) the Principle that in all true propositions the predicate is included in the subject, (3) the principles that the contingent truths are grounded in final causes, and (4) the actual contingents are determined by the principle of the best. Now which of these is the Principle of Sufficient Reason? It is certain that it is not (1). But it is not at all certain that it is not (2) or (3) or (4). As we have seen,

the scholars have identified this principle with (2) (Eg. Couturat), with (3) and (4) (Russell), and with (4) only (Erdmann). It is impossible to state which of these is right, and futile in the face of conflicting statements of Leibniz. It is best to leave the matter in this undecided state.

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NOTES

1. *The Philosophy of Leibniz* : By Nicholas Rescher, Prentice-Hall, (1967), p. 25.
2. G. is the short form for *Die Philosophen Scriften Von Leibniz*, Ed. by C. I. Gerhardt.