

**Christopher Noble (Villanova University)***“Leibniz’s Comments on Spinoza’s Philosophy”*

This paper analyzes Leibniz’s 1707 criticisms of Spinoza in *Comments on Spinoza’s Philosophy*. On the surface it is tempting to see Leibniz’ comments as presenting a traditional theological critique of Spinoza’s philosophy, motivated by a rejection of the theological danger presented by Spinoza’s unification of the one absolutely infinite God with its infinite finite worldly affections. Insofar as there is no distance separating God from the world, Spinoza’s position implies pantheism and the rejection of transcendence. However tempting this interpretation may be, it runs the risk of seeing Leibniz’s criticisms as externally motivated by Leibniz’ own theological concerns. This paper will show, however, that Leibniz’ critique perceptively recognizes and points out an apparent inconsistency in Spinoza’s philosophy, and hence that Leibniz is in fact attempting to undermine Spinoza from within and on the latter’s own terms.

The inconsistency that Leibniz identifies pertains to Spinoza’s definition of essence in the Ethics, an inconsistency whose resolution he argues would force Spinoza to admit some degree of separation between God’s essence and the essences of created or produced things. For Leibniz, if Spinoza properly understood the nature of essence, the latter would be forced towards the Leibnizian conclusion that this separation implies free choice on the part of God and of contingency – not necessity – on the side of finite things. According to Leibniz:

“Spinoza says that there is no knowledge of particular things, that is, of things ‘whose existence has no connection with their essence, and which are thus not eternal truths’; for them there is only experience. This contradicts what he had said elsewhere, that everything is necessary and everything flows necessarily from the divine essence. In the same way he opposes those who say that the nature of God relates to the essence of created thing (E2P10sch.) and yet elsewhere he had claimed that things

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neither are nor are conceived without God, and arise from him necessarily.”<sup>1</sup>

Leibniz’s claims pose a difficulty for Spinoza because both of these admissions would contravene central arguments of Spinoza’s *Ethics* relating to the alleged necessity of God’s worldly productions.

I argue that Leibniz thus points out a key ambiguity in Spinoza’s text, one that the latter never explicitly addressed. Nevertheless, I argue that Spinoza has the means to address this ambiguity with regards to essences insofar as he does in fact intend two different forms of necessity in the *Ethics*: one applies to the essence of infinite things – i.e. the one absolutely infinite substance and its infinity of attributes each infinite in its own kind – that are cause of themselves and the other applies to the essence of finite modes that “exist in something else” and which are caused by a prior series of efficient causes. Whereas Leibniz recognizes the first sense of necessity, he does not recognize the latter. The fact that Spinoza was never explicit about his own distinction shows us that Leibniz’ misunderstanding is in fact productive for showing the necessity of clearly distinguishing how Spinoza uses the terms essence and necessity in different ways. This in turn allows us to clarify both Spinoza and Leibniz’ positions with regards to the modal status of both infinite and finite things thereby situating the philosophical difference between the two at a deeper level.

In conclusion then, an examination of Leibniz’ *Comments* shows that the debate between Leibniz and Spinoza is not merely taking place between the theist and the pantheist, one who believes that God had a choice in creating what He did, and one who does not, but that the lines of the debate need to be redrawn. The relevant difference hinges on whether or not the category of necessity admit of two senses such that it can be applied legitimately to the infinite substance on the one hand and to the finite terms in a series of efficient causes on the other. For Leibniz, the answer is clearly no, and the virtue of his criticism in the *Comments* is to show that in order to prevent Spinoza’s philosophy from being ultimately incoherent, the latter must more explicitly answer yes.

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<sup>1</sup> Leibniz, G.W. *Comments on Spinoza’s Philosophy*, in G.W. Leibniz; Philosophical Essays, ed. and transl. Roger Ariew and Daniel Garber. Indianapolis; Hackett: 1989 pp. 273-281. 280-281