Leibniz on Justice as a Common Concept: A Rejoinder to Patrick Riley

Andreas Blank, Tel Aviv University

1. Introduction

In his tercentenary article on the *Méditation sur la notion commune de la justice*, Professor Patrick Riley suggested that the Platonic doctrine of eternal verities seen by God is the dominating idea in Leibniz's perhaps most important writing on universal justice.[1] In a discussion note, I suggested supplementing the emphasis on the Platonic doctrine of eternal truths—a doctrine that exemplifies a type of "dogmatic" metaphysics in Kant's sense and of "revisionary" metaphysics in Strawson's sense—by considering some descriptive strategies Leibniz applies in the same work. In particular, I argued that the sorites arguments in the second part of the *Méditation* exemplify a type of reasoning that, by constructing intermediary cases between particular and universal justice, makes implications of our everyday conception of justice explicit. Moreover, I pointed out that this kind of argument has analogies in other sorites arguments in Leibniz's early writings on justice.[2] In a detailed and passionate reply, Professor Riley contested the viability of looking for analogies between Leibniz's (very) early and later writings on justice, pointing out the differences in Leibniz's views in the relevant periods.[3] Moreover, he argued that reading the *Méditation* against the background of the contemporary *Nouveaux Essais*—according to him, Leibniz's "greatest Platonising work"[4]—shows that "both the 'background and the 'foreground' of *justitia caritas sapientis* are dominated by a single giant figure: Plato".[5]

 I am very grateful for the great care Professor Riley has taken in discussing my views. I learnt a lot from the wealth of textual observations contained in his reply. Moreover, I am glad to hear that he agrees with the central claim of my discussion note, namely, that there is a side to Leibniz's theory of justice that is based on the analysis of what people ordinarily think about justice.[6] I also agree with Professor Riley that there are substantial differences between Leibniz's early and later views on justice—most notably, the absence of perfectionism in the early years and the contrast between the early voluntarism and the later anti-voluntarism about eternal truths.[7] Moreover, re-reading the *Méditation*, I think that I did injustice to his interpretation when I said that it "captures nicely the Platonic terminology"

of this work. Of course, it captures the terminology, but, more importantly, it also captures the elements of Platonic doctrine present in the *Méditation*—in particular the view that moral truths *are* eternal verities in the mind of God.[8] At the same time, re-reading the *Méditation*, also some descriptive elements in the first part of the text came to my attention. In my discussion note, I did not say anything about them (nor, for that matter, much about the first part of the *Méditation*). However, these descriptive elements are pertinent to the question of how dominant Plato is in the *Méditation*. In addition, some of them are relevant to the question of how methodological aspects of the *Méditation* hang together with methodological aspects of Leibniz's early writings and with the view of justice as an innate concept in the *Nouveaux Essais*. Since these points concern some of the objections that Professor Riley raises against my interpretation, I would like to say a few things about them in the present short rejoinder.

2. Anti-Voluntarism and the Ordinary Conception of Justice

Leibniz opens the first part of the *Méditation* by considering the following alternative: Either what is just is just because God wills it, or God wills it because it is just.[9] The second option is cast in expressions derived from Plato's *Euthyphro*: if moral truths do not depend from the will of God, they belong to the realm of necessary and eternal truths.[10] As it turns out soon, Leibniz takes sides with the second option, thus holding that moral truths are necessary and eternal truths in the mind of God. If this is Platonism (even, as Riley acknowledges, in a substantially modified form[11]), then Leibniz takes a Platonist stance on the nature of moral truths in the mind of God. However, why does he do this? Obviously, he starts from a problem of philosophical theology. Indeed, some of the arguments he gives for anti-voluntarism about moral truths in the Divine mind use the register of theology. Leibniz says a few (not very convincing) things about the devil, and he points out that the biblical creation story favors anti-voluntarism. But even within the theological register, this is not all. Rather, he develops a conceptual argument that could be stated as follows. According to the received concept of God, God is just. However, according to voluntarism, the concept of justice does not add anything to the concept of agency. In this case, in Divine action, the will takes the place of reason. This corresponds to the concept of a tyrant and, hence, is contrary to the concept of a just being.[12]

This kind of conceptual argument is continued when Leibniz discusses the passage from Plato's *Republic* about Thrasymachus' definition of justice. Thrasymachus suggests defining justice as what pleases the most powerful.[13] Here, clearly, Leibniz considers justice on the level of human actions. And, obviously, he uses a reference to Plato to make his point. But the point Leibniz wants to make is not based on a theory of eternal verities. Rather, he argues that Thrasymachus' definition has the consequence that if two judges, one of them powerful, the other of them powerless, make the same judgement about the same action (in the same context), if the powerful judge judges it to be just, it is just, if the powerless judge judges it to be just, it is not just. As Leibniz points out, this way of using the concept of being just is absurd.[14] As he goes on to explicate, it is absurd because it contradicts our everyday way of thinking about justice: "This is, indeed, to change the nature of terms and to speak a language different from that of other men …".[15] Thus, the correlate of anti-voluntarism about Divine justice—something that could be called anti-voluntarism about human justice—is described as an implication of what we ordinarily think about justice.

Leibniz goes on to argue that if the concept of justice must be common to all rational beings—human and Divine. He envisages different possibilities, each of which is descriptively inadequate. Either, the concept of justice is found only in the Divine mind, but in this case, there would be no human justice, contrary to what we think about just human actions. Or, the concept of justice is found only in the human mind, but in this case, there would be no Divine justice, contrary to the commonly accepted concept of God. Or, justice in the human mind and justice in the divine mind are different concepts, but in this case the term "justice" would lose its meaning.[16] Hence, if anti-voluntarism about human justice is true—as established on purely descriptive grounds—also anti-voluntarism about Divine justice is true. As Leibniz points out, this argument is based on "the fundamental rules of reasoning and of discourse".[17] Since anti-voluntarism about Divine justice involves the existence of eternal moral verities in the Divine mind, Leibniz takes a Platonist position. However, the argument leading up to this conclusion has a descriptive starting point in the analysis of our everyday concept of justice. In this way, his philosophical theology incorporates descriptive insights into the nature of moral truths in the human mind.

3. The Comparison Between Moral and Arithmetical Truths

That a descriptive side supplements the Platonic side of Leibniz's thought about justice also becomes evident when he, in the first part of the *Méditation*, associates moral truths with arithmetical truths. To be sure, in claiming that moral truths, in some respect, are like arithmetical truths, Leibniz *does* go Platonic, since he holds that God thinks the same about numbers as we do.[18] However, at the same time, he also goes descriptive, since he also assigns to figures a role in the demonstration of arithmetical truths. In order to demonstrate the arithmetical theorem that the differences between subsequent square numbers are represented by the series of uneven numbers, he devises the following figure, which represents the numerical units contained in whole numbers by means of small squares:[19]

| 1	1	1	1
3	2	2	2
5	4	3	3
7	6	5	4

$$1 \quad 4 \quad 9 \quad 16 \quad 25$$
$$3 \quad 5 \quad 7 \quad 9$$

I suggest reading the figure as follows: the first small square in the upper left corner symbolises both the number 1 and its square number. Then go to the square to the right of it: the two squares together symbolise the number 2, and taken together with the two squares below them, they symbolise the square number of 2. Now, these four squares together can be seen as a larger square, and the question is: how many more small square does this large square contain compared to the square symbolizing the previous square number? The small square in the upper left corner symbolizes this first square number. So, begin counting with the small square to the right of it (1), then go to the square below this square (2), and then to the square to the left of this square (3). Hence, the difference between the two square numbers is the uneven number 3. Apply this procedure to the three small squares representing the number 3, and you find out that the large square representing the square number of 3 has 5 small squares more than the previous large square. And so on. Looking at this figure in this way, thus, shows that a particular arithmetical theorem is true. But doing so does not depend on a theory of eternal truths. Rather, it develops implications of our ordinary number concept.

   Already in his early work, Leibniz emphasizes the descriptive side of arithmetical theorems by using figures in their proofs in ways similar to the first part of the

Méditation. For example, in a piece on the Universal Characteristic from around 1679–80, he argues that **there are areas of arithmetic that can be constructed by using figures**:

For example, we easily see from the following figure

.	o	o	o		0	1	3	6	10	15
.	.	o	o							
.	.	.	o		1	4	9	16	25	
.	.	.	.							
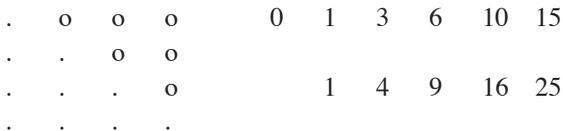
that the numbers in the triangle which are closest to each other (such as 10 and 6) compose the square number (16) of (4) of the long side of the larger triangle; but we do not recognize with a similar easy method that the sum of numbers therefore is equal to the square of the number of the side of the same triangle.[20]

While the use of the figure in this passage may not be immediately perspicuous, what Leibniz seems to have in mind is the following: If you count the circles forming a triangle in the schema, you get the number 6. Then enlarge the triangle by replacing the diagonal series of dots by circles to form what Leibniz calls the "larger" triangle. If you count the circles forming this triangle, you get the number 10. (The first series of numbers—0, 1, 3, 6, 10, 15—represents the numbers of elements obtained by enlarging the triangle.) Going through such a procedure shows that the sum of the circles in the smaller and larger triangles equals the square of the number of circles forming the long side of the larger triangle. (The second series of numbers—1, 4, 9, 16, 25—represents the series of square numbers). If this is indeed Leibniz's argument, then the outlined use of the figure is an example of how figures play a role in proving arithmetical truths. Again, the point to note is that such a demonstration of arithmetical truths is independent of a theory of eternal truths in the Divine mind. Rather, the figure explicates certain features of our ordinary number concept, and thereby demonstrates some necessary, conceptual truth.

Thus, from early on, there is a descriptive, bottom-up side to Leibniz's view of arithmetic. Moreover, when in the *Méditation* he compares moral truths with arithmetical truths, the use he makes of the figure indicates that he has not only the revisionary, top-down side of a theory of Platonic eternal verities in mind, but also this descriptive side of arithmetic. Thus, the comparison between moral and

arithmetical truths carries with it not only the connotation of Platonism, but also the connotation of conceptual analysis.

4. Justice and Innateness in the *Nouveaux Essais*

A similar picture emerges from Leibniz's view of moral and arithmetical truths as innate knowledge in the *Nouveaux Essais***.** To be sure, there is a strongly Platonist side to Leibniz's conception of ideas. For instance, he holds that the ideas in the human mind—in particular, the "distinct" ideas of reason—represent ideas in the mind of God.[21] In this sense, ideas of reason are common to human minds and the Divine mind.[22] Even if there were no human minds, the Divine mind still would be the "region of eternal verities".[23] Leibniz also takes up the view of St. Paul, according to which God has instilled the human mind with ideas of reason.[24] Moreover, as Riley points out, Leibniz inserts remarks about the concept of justice at a surprisingly late place in the *Nouveaux Essais***,** when discussing the role of principles in deductive modes of reasoning.[25] Thus, the human idea of justice not only mirrors the Divine idea of justice, it also serves as the starting point of deductive arguments.

   However, this is not the whole story. Leibniz also integrates the concept of justice into the framework of his theory of reflective knowledge. In particular, he claims that moral truths belong to the innate truths that are accessible by "the light of reason" (*par lumière*).[26] Now, Leibniz does not understand the light of reason as a kind of intuitive insight. Rather, in the case of just actions, he holds that there is a proof, which one obtains when one specifies the reason (*lors qu'on rend raison*) for our innate instinct to act in a just way.[27] Moreover, he likens the role of proofs for moral truths to the role of proofs of laws of inference in logic and of proofs in mathematics. The point of the comparison is not to integrate all fields into a framework of deductive science. Rather, Leibniz holds that proofs in logic make something explicit that we have a confused knowledge of since implicitly we always apply the laws of inference. Likewise, mathematicians specify the reasons of what we do without thinking about it.[28] Thus, the demonstrations that the "internal light of reason" (*lumière interne*)[29] provides us with are not bound to a deductive methodology. Rather, the "light of reason" is internal in exactly the sense that it concerns ideas, something that is within the mind. Hence, the demonstrations associated with this mode of reasoning start with the analysis of ideas, thereby making implicit knowledge explicit.

In the *Nouveaux Essais***,** Leibniz takes such a descriptive, bottom-up approach to metaphysical concepts (such as the concepts of activity, unity, and representation) as well as and to principles of reason (such as the principle of sufficient reason, the principle of contradiction and the principle of the identity of indiscernibles). I have argued for such an interpretation, which supplements the interpretation of Leibniz's metaphysics as a hypothetico-deductive system, in detail at other places.[30] Here, I would only like to emphasize that Leibniz also integrated the concept of justice in his descriptive, bottom-up mode of thought. Consider the following passage. Philalèthe, Locke's spokesperson, suggests a distinction between two types of ideas: one type of ideas depends on objects such as a horse or piece of iron as their prototypes (*patrons***),** while the other type of ideas—to which he counts the idea of justice—depends on something that is in the mind as their models (*modelles originaux***).**[31] Théophile, Leibniz's spokesperson, does not reject the distinction out of hand but points out that the prototypes of ideas of both kinds are equally real. Interestingly, he does *not* invoke a theory of abstract, Platonic entities to explicate what is real about the prototypes of ideas such as the concept of justice. Rather, he argues that "[t]he qualities of the mind are not less real than those of the body".[32] Putting what is real about the prototypes of the concept of justice in this way implies that knowledge concerning justice is derived from something that is in the human mind. Moreover, Leibniz goes on to argue that one understands better what justice is than what a horse is, since justice "is no less in the actions than the curvature and obliquity are in motions, whether or not one gives consideration to it or not." Thus, again, moral truths are likened to mathematical truths. And, again, what is common to both kinds of truths is that they are there—either in human action or in the geometry of motion—and only have to be brought out by reflection. Finally, Leibniz remarks:

> And in order to show that all human beings share my opinion and even those most capable and most experienced in the human affairs, I have only to use the authority of the Roman jurists, which are followed by all others, who call the … moral entities, *objects* and particularly, *incorporeal objects***.**[33]

Here Leibniz regards the Roman jurists as authors that are most knowledgeable about human affairs and therefore most capable of bringing out concepts common to all human beings. Hence, Leibniz uses Roman law not only from the perspective of a deductive science. Rather, he thinks that it exemplifies most perfectly a type of reasoning that also underlies aspects of his own theory of justice. Moral and legal concepts, according to his view, can adequately be described as "incorporeal

objects", since they depend on something real in human ideas and actions. In this sense, they are descriptively accessible.

5. Conclusion

In this short rejoinder, I have pointed out some more descriptive elements in the *Méditation sur la notion commune de la justice*, as well as some parallels between them and descriptive strands of thought in the early Leibniz and the *Nouveaux Essais*. I argued that these descriptive elements counterbalance the (dogmatic and revisionary) theory of Platonic eternal verities that is present in Leibniz's philosophy, too. Let me emphasize that the parallels between the uses of figures in the *Méditation* and the early Leibniz are *local* and *methodological* parallels. They do not presuppose that everything the early Leibniz thought about justice or arithmetic coincides with what the later Leibniz thought. The parallels go as far as they go, but they go far enough, in my view, to draw attention to the presence of a particular type of descriptive, bottom-up reasoning at places where its presence often has been overlooked. Moreover, the parallels between the comparison drawn in the *Méditation* between moral and arithmetical truths and that drawn between them in the *Nouveaux Essais* make it evident that this comparison, in Leibniz's view, does not reduce to a comparison between two kinds of Platonic eternal verities. Rather, the comparison also carries with it an emphasis on making concepts implicitly expressed in human thought and agency explicit. Thus, reading the *Méditation* against the background of the *Nouveaux Essais* reinforces the view that the methodology underlying the *Méditation* is more pluralistic and less dogmatic than the opening lines alluding to the *Euthyphro* might lead one to expect.

Andreas Blank
Cohn Institute
Tel Aviv University
69978 Tel Aviv, Israel
andreasblank@hotmail.com

Notes

[1] Patrick Riley, "Leibniz's *Méditation sur la notion commune de la justice*, 1703-2003", *Leibniz Review* 13 (2003), pp. 67–81.

[2] Andreas Blank, "Definitions, Sorites Arguments, and Leibniz's *Méditation sur la notion commune de la justice*", *Leibniz Review* 14 (2004), pp. 153–166.

[3] Patrick Riley, "Leibniz's *Méditation sur la notion commune de la justice*: A Reply to Andreas Blank", *Leibniz Review* 15 (2005), pp. 185–216.

[4] Riley, "Reply", p. 207.

[5] Riley, "Reply", p. 212.

[6] See Riley, "Reply", p. 187.

[7] See Riley, "Reply", pp. 194–195; 203–205.

[8] See Riley, "Reply", p. 206.

[9] Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz, *Political Writings*, trans. and ed. Patrick Riley, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2nd ed., 1988, p. 45.

[10] See Plato, *Euthyphro*, 9e–10e.

[11] See Riley, "Reply", pp. 194–197.

[12] *Political Writings*, p. 46.

[13] Plato, *Republic* I 338c ff.

[14] *Political Writings*, p. 47.

[15] Ibid.

[16] *Political Writings*, pp. 48–49.

[17] *Political Writings*, p. 48.

[18] *Political Writings*, p. 49.

[19] Ibid.

[20] De arte characteristica inventoriaque (May 1679–April 1680 [?]); A VI, 4, 325–326. For a detailed examination of this and related passages in the early Leibniz, see Andreas Blank, *Leibniz: Metaphilosophy and Metaphysics, 1666-1686*, Munich: Philosophia Verlag, 2005, ch. 8.

[21] NE II 1 § 1; A VI, 6, 109.

[22] NE IV 5 § 1; A VI, 6, 397.

[23] NE IV 11 §§ 13-14; A VI, 6, 447.

[24] NE I 2 § 9; A VI, 6, 92.

[25] NE IV 7 § 19; A VI, 6, 424–427; see Riley, "Reply", pp. 206–212.

[26] NE I 2 § 4; A VI, 6, 91.

[27] Ibid.

[28] Ibid.

[29] See NE I 2 § 9; A VI, 6, 92.

[30] See Andreas Blank, *Der logische Aufbau von Leibniz' Metaphysik*, Berlin—New York: De Gruyter, 2001, especially ch. 2 and 4; "Twin-Consciousnesses and the

Identity of Indiscernibles in Leibniz's *Nouveaux Essais*" in François Duchesneau and Jérémy Griard (eds.), *Leibniz selon les 'Nouveaux essais sur l'entendemend humain'*, Montréal: Bellarmin/ Paris: Vrin, 2006, pp. 189-202.

[31] NE III 5 § 12; A VI, 6, 303.

[32] Ibid.

[33] Ibid.