

Comments on Julia Jorati's "How to be More Spontaneous: Leibniz on the Best Type of Agency" for *Activity, Spontaneity, and Agency in Later Medieval and Early Modern Philosophy – An International Conference*, University of Toronto, June 9-10, 2016

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Julia's clear, interesting, and challenging paper begins with a puzzle. She tells us, "sometimes, Leibniz says that all monads are perfectly spontaneous because they do not interact with one another ... At other times, however, he talks as if there were degrees of spontaneity, and as if free actions were more spontaneous than unfree actions. How should we deal with this tension?"

I confess I don't find this particular puzzle all that vexing. It seems to me that Leibniz associates spontaneity with freedom. He thinks that causal activity is a necessary condition for freedom. When he speaks of perfect spontaneity he generally means to indicate that each monad is causally independent of every other monad. But he also thinks that monads can be more or less free insofar as their actions satisfy various conditions. When he speaks of monads as having degrees of spontaneity, he generally means to indicate that those conditions may be more or less satisfied. As far as puzzling features of Leibniz's system go this one doesn't seem to me to run very deep.

But even if that's right, it certainly doesn't mean that there isn't much to be learned in sorting out the details of Leibniz's understanding of spontaneity and how to increase it. Julia aims to make progress in this regard by distinguishing three types of spontaneity: metaphysical, agent and rational. Very briefly, metaphysical spontaneity, according to Julia, is "The absence of real, physical influences from other created substances" (4). Agent spontaneity, in contrast, "requires

the absence of ideal external influences” (7). Finally, rational spontaneity “belongs to actions to the extent that they are determined by reason rather than by non-rational inclinations and perceptions ... Thus, a monadic action is an instance of rational spontaneity insofar as it is exempt ... from determination by factors external to the rational aspect of the agent’s nature” (8-9).

Julia’s tri-partite distinction might make it seem as though Leibniz’s use of the term “spontaneity” is ambiguous – or really “tri-biguous;” that is to say, Julia’s tri-partite division might make it seem as if Leibniz is guilty of using the term “spontaneity” in three independent senses. But I don’t think that that’s her view. Rather, I think her view is that Leibniz’s uses the term “spontaneity” to denote three different species belonging to common genus. His use of the term “spontaneity” is more like our use of the word “bank” to denote both savings banks and investment banks rather than our use of the same term to denote financial institutions and river ways.

If that is right, what then characterizes the genus of the term “spontaneity” according to Julia? What is it, that metaphysical, agent and rational spontaneity have in common? I see Julia’s answer to this question as being at the heart of what is interesting and provocative about her paper. She see the three species of spontaneity which she identifies as being all in accord “with the general definition of spontaneity as self-determination independently of external influence, or as the determination of actions by the agent’s own nature or ‘depths.’” She suggests that “This definition yields different types of spontaneity because we can construe the agent’s nature or depths in broader and narrower ways, that is, we can understand what is internal and external to the agent in different ways” (4).

I think Julia is right in thinking that Leibniz’s understanding of spontaneity is not simply ambiguous. I also think she is right in thinking that we can see three different senses of

spontaneity at play in Leibniz's thinking. I'm less confident, however, in her proposal concerning what it is that relates those three senses. As I hinted at in the beginning, I think that Leibniz's various uses of the term "spontaneity" are all related by his understanding of freedom. In short, an agent is more spontaneous to the extent that her actions are freer. I don't think Julia would disagree with that, but she also offers us something more. As we've just seen from her general definition, she suggests that all the senses in which Leibniz uses the term "spontaneity" are related by varying senses of what is "internal" and what is "external" to an agent. In short, according to Julia's Leibniz, an agent is more spontaneous to the extent that she is less determined by external influences.

As a common thread uniting metaphysical and agent spontaneity, I think Julia's proposal works fairly well. It is of course paradigmatically appropriate in the case of metaphysical spontaneity. A monad enjoys metaphysical spontaneity just insofar as it is causally independent of other monads. It also works fairly well in a more abstract sense in the case of agent spontaneity. In general, a monad enjoys greater agent spontaneity just insofar as it what it does is not determined ideally by other substances. I add the qualification "fairly well" because Leibniz himself seems to offer different characterizations of what Julia is getting at, and I'm not sure they are all consistent. What should we say, for example, when the doctor ideally sets my broken leg? Does my agent spontaneity decrease because another substance is ideally acting on me? Or does my agent spontaneity increase because the ideal setting increases my perfection.

The idea that spontaneity has at its core a distinction between self-determination and external influence, however, seems to me more strained in the case of rational spontaneity. To apply it in this case, we have to first suppose that even within the monad we find a dynamic akin to the struggle of two agents – a rational agency, on the one hand, and a passionate agency on the other. This gives us an analogue to the inner-outer dichotomy that is more readily apparent in the

cases of metaphysical and agent spontaneity. Second, the agent herself must be identified with one of those agencies in particular, most plausibly in our case with rational agency. And this is what I think Julia is getting at when she writes “the rational part of our mind is the part with which we ought to identify most strongly. Any non-rational, non-voluntary factors are thus alien to us *qua* rational, free agents and are undue influences. While these factors are strictly speaking internal to our souls, they can be entirely unwelcome, and we in fact ought to fight them – as if they were foreign elements – to keep them from determining our actions” (11).

Historically speaking this is not a preposterous view. It is a common – if often challenged – trope in discussions of the passions reaching back to the ancient Greeks that reason is active and passions are passive (James 915).¹ Spinoza, for example, suggests that the passions follow from inadequate ideas and that insofar as minds have inadequate ideas they are acted upon (*Ethics* III.iii). I might add, as an aside, that this line of thought also seems to me to dovetail with an understanding of monadic teleology that Julia, up to a point, shares with Don Rutherford according to which monads enjoy appetites *not* directed at what the monad perceives as good, and which therefore serve as convenient surrogates for the causal influences we would normally attribute to external bodies.

Nonetheless, I think casting Leibniz’s rational spontaneity in terms of a kind of inner vs. outer, internal vs. alien conflict threatens to encourage what I think – albeit conjecturally – is a misleading picture of how reason is related to freedom for Leibniz. According to that picture – often, but I think wrongly attributed to both the ancient Stoics and to Spinoza – to act under the influence of the passions is always to act unfreely. We are freer to the extent that we are able to be directed dispassionately under the cool guidance of reason. The maximally free agent – the

¹ See Susan James, “The Passions in Metaphysics and the Theory of Action,” in *The Cambridge History of Seventeenth-Century Philosophy*, eds., Daniel Garber and Michael Ayers (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press), p. 915.

sage or the wise man – is someone who has maximally diminished or even extirpated the passions altogether. The maximally free agent is much more Dr. Spock and not at all Captain Kirk. This picture provides a sense in which a philosopher at least might think that a sage bound on the rack might be freer than an Epicurean saint pursuing moderate pleasures without impediment.

Whatever might be said for an “inevitable contest” model of freedom, it is not, I think, Leibniz’s considered view. Rather Leibniz holds to a picture that Susan James describes as broadly “Aristotelian,” (although it seems to me that it might also be thought of as broadly “Platonic”). At any rate, a picture according to which our passions “can be tamed and transformed into impulses which promote our well-being” (914). On this picture even our passions are fundamentally good – after all, by the medieval period at least, they were thought to have been given to us by a benevolent god for good reason. Nonetheless they are potentially unruly and need to be shaped, directed and checked. The wise person, the freest person, is a person who has tamed her passions so that they are well-ordered. She’s still not Kirk, but she’s not Spock either. She is neither without passion nor prone to uncontrolled outbursts. Most importantly for the point I want to make here, however, the maximally free person is not the person who has maximally diminished her passions or extirpated them altogether. The idea that passions are always opposed to reason – an external, alien force to be resisted – is simply the wrong picture. Reason is opposed to excessive passion, but the ideal is a harmonious confluence where the passions persist under the reign of reason. Rational spontaneity is in this crucial regard disanalogous to metaphysical spontaneity and that in turn suggests to me at least that an internal vs. external dichotomy is not, after all, what unifies Leibniz’s various senses of spontaneity.

Finally, I’ll add in closing, that getting the right picture here is, I think, important for understanding Leibniz’s suggestions for how to increase our spontaneity, another important focus of Julia’s paper. On the inevitable-opposition picture, we should expect Leibniz to advise

us on how we might purge ourselves of our passions, how we might, perhaps through meditation or discipline, free ourselves altogether from the influence alien emotions. And indeed Julia cites a nice passage that might seem to go a bit in that direction. In general, however, I think Leibniz means to advise us not to purge our passions but rather to moderate, control and steer them to fit the dictates of reason. Passions are not to be driven out as an alien force, but rather to be brought harmoniously into the fold. It is, I think, not only literally sage advice, but also advice that makes better sense against a backdrop according to which rational spontaneity is conceived as a species of freedom but is not conceived primarily terms of a quasi-internal vs. quasi-external opposition between reason and the passions.

Thanks very much to Julia for the rich and stimulating paper, and thanks for listening.