

LEXICON PHILOSOPHICUM

International Journal for the History of Texts and Ideas

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Leibniz on Natural Piety: Toward a Conceptual Reconstruction

ABSTRACT: The paper examines key transitions in Leibniz's reflection on natural piety and the affective mechanisms underlying sensitivity to others' pleasure and pain. In particular, through a comparison between two texts – *Tit. I, De jure et iustitia* and the *Nouveaux essais* – it focuses on: a) the inclusion of natural law within the scope of gnoseology, b) the terminological shifts that signal the extension of natural piety to the entire animal genus, following Leibniz's abandonment of the Cartesian theory of the animal-machines, and c) the corresponding changes in the notion of moral personhood.

KEYWORDS: Natural Piety; Sense of Humanity; Instinct of Society; Human and Non-human Animals; Personhood

1. INTRODUCTION

This paper provides a preliminary survey of possible pivotal factors underlying the development of Leibniz's account of natural piety. Beyond his well-known doctrines of disinterested love and charity of the wise,¹ recent scholarship argues that substantial textual evidence supports not only the reading that Leibniz recognizes both the cognitive and the affective components of 'empathy',² but also that he characterizes the latter as a form of natural piety.³

The following sections single out two main shifts of this account across two target texts, excerpted from the *Tit. I, De jure et iustitia* and the *Nouveaux essais* (NE):

(a) an interdisciplinary expansion, from its early formulation within the framework of pure natural law to its later integration into the innatist epistemology of the NE;

(b) a metaphysical transformation concerning the status of non-human animals, moving from the Cartesian doctrine of animal automatism to the recognition of animal souls, in line with Leibniz's mature theory of individual substances.

These two textual *loci* should be regarded as representing two fundamental stages of Leibniz's reflection on natural piety and offering a privileged perspective on the evo-

1. See at least Piro 1999; Goldenbaum 2009; Brown 2011; Horowska 2017.

2. See Phemister 2016; Kreymann 2023; Aiello 2025; see also Piro 2024 and Aiello 2022. The cognitive dimension is grounded in the principle of taking 'la place d'autrui': cf. A IV, 3, 903-904; A IV, 10, 34 and NE 92. See also Piro 2024 and Naaman-Zauderer 2008.

3. See Aiello 2025.



lution of this topic, as well as a suitable context for locating (c) the substantial revision of the moral and juridical notion of personhood Leibniz undertook as of the 1680s.

2. THE *TITULUS I: SENSUS HUMANITATIS* AND THE DIVIDE BETWEEN PERSONS AND ANIMAL-MACHINES

Besides a few earlier seminal instances connected to the definition of love,⁴ Leibniz offers a more comprehensive account of a sensitivity to others' pleasure and pain in a text titled *Tit. I, De jure et iustitia* (1678-1679):

The first is our own utility whereby we do no harm to anyone for fear of the reaction of the aggrieved, and we benefit as many as we can so that the common good redounds to our advantage. The second is the sense of humanity (*sensus humanitatis*) and virtue. For even when no danger comes to us, the evil of others displeases and touches us (*tangimur*), and the happiness of others pleases us (*delectamur*), because we see virtue followed by deserved reward. Justice and the definition of 'good man' consist in this affection of man towards man (*in hoc affectu hominis erga hominem*) [...]. And because that sense of humanity [...] is inherent in everyone, there arises in men the prick of conscience (*stimulus conscientiae*), which gives a feeling of dissatisfaction and being stung and lacerated within themselves (*sentiatque intus quosdam laniatus et ictus*) to those who transgress its commands: this constitutes a natural punishment.⁵

Here Leibniz contrasts different motivating principles of just action: on the one hand, personal utility leads us to avoid harming others out of fear of retaliation and to promote the common good insofar as it benefits us. On the other hand, the *sensus humanitatis* – a sensible capacity to be affected by others' states of pleasure and pain, sorrow and happiness – motivates us to act justly for the sake of others, regardless of any additional advantage to ourselves. This second and more perfect principle is accompanied by a natural mechanism of moral regulation: in fact, when the *sensus humanitatis* is weakened and fails to guide action, the 'prick of conscience' produces an experience of inner discomfort, described in quasi-physical terms as a feeling of being 'stung and lacerated'. According to Leibniz, this experience constitutes a 'natural punishment', inscribed in the impersonal level of the order of nature.⁶ Two important consequences follow. First, the *stimulus conscientiae* works as a purely affective signal, alerting us that something in our deeds is wrong without specifying what is wrong. Second, this implies a *pre-reflective* conception of remorse, which precedes explicit moral cognition and differs both from the penitential tradition – where remorse anticipates contrition – and from the Cartesian account, which treats remorse as a reflective, doubt-involving passion of the soul.⁷

4. See A VI, 3, 115 and A II, 1, 280.

5. A VI, 4, 2779, my transl.

6. On the idea of 'natural punishment', see also NE 96 and GP VI, 318.

7. Cf. Descartes, AT XI, 376 and 464. It is worth noting that Leibniz uses the expression 'stimulus conscientiae' rather than 'conscientiae morsus', widely circulating in the coeval moral-philosophical context (see Chauvin 1692: 134).

Although in the *Tit. I* Leibniz proposes Ulpian's definition of natural law as "what nature taught to all animals",⁸ the analyzed passage is clear in restricting to inter-human relations the natural affection implied by the *sensus humanitatis*. It is likely that at that stage Leibniz was still tied to the legal and moral definition of the person he had provided at the beginning of the 1670s, one that reflected his provisional adherence to the Cartesian doctrine of animal-machines. In the *Elementa juris naturalis* (1671), the person is defined as "whoever loves himself, or whoever is affected by pleasure or pain", while, correlatively, the beast (*brutus*) is conceived as a being that feels "neither pleasure nor pain nor sensation, any more than in a machine or in a mirror".⁹ The pivotal feature of the animal-machine doctrine informing this juridical definition of the brute is the notion of external sensibility. In fact, according to the animal-machine theory, beasts only 'simulate' sensibility, since they are endowed solely with mechanical and predetermined responses to differential external stimuli. We are misled into attributing genuine inner states to them only because we cannot perceive the underlying mechanical structure of their bodies.¹⁰ Since they lack genuine experience of pleasure and pain, non-human animals cannot genuinely count as moral recipients of human love, let alone as moral agents.

Nonetheless, Leibniz already in the *Elementa* expresses unease with the Cartesian view of the *bête-machine*, suggesting that if animals were shown to possess true sensibility, their mistreatment would constitute genuine cruelty.¹¹ Along with the later appeal to Ulpian's definition of natural law in the *Tit. I*, this hesitation in the *Elementa* is philosophically significant, as it foreshadows Leibniz's later metaphysical rehabilitation of animal souls without yet fully abandoning the Cartesian framework.

3. NOUVEAUX ESSAIS: THE INSTINCT OF NATURAL PIETY IN THE ANIMAL GENUS AND THE HUMAN SPECIES

In *Nouveaux essais*, book I, ch. 2,¹² Leibniz reworks at length the elements of natural piety singled out in the *Tit. I* (utility, sense of humanity, prick of conscience), transposing them into the gnoseology of virtual innatism.

Against Locke's moral conventionalism, Leibniz in this section maintains that moral principles are innate, much like arithmetic ones, yet are not always consciously accessible. On this basis, he posits a dual access to moral truths:¹³ on the one hand, a rational and demonstrative access through *lumière naturelle*; on the other, an immediate practical access through instincts, i.e. non-rational inclinations that guide action

8. A VI, 4, 2778; see also A VI, 4, 2929.

9. A VI, 1, 466.

10. Cf. A VI, 1, 482.

11. Cf. *ibid.*

12. Cf. NE 88-101.

13. See Jorati 2014.

toward what is good and fitting, anticipating what reason would prescribe.¹⁴ Instincts thus function as a ‘natural program’ implanted into the souls by God, producing *from below* and in a confused manner the same practical outcomes toward the good that reason would prescribe distinctly *from above*. Because of the divinely established connection between the good, the useful, and the pleasant, actions guided by instinct are accompanied by pleasure. Within this natural framework, pleasure represents a sensible mark of the good and exhibits an intrinsically superindividual structure, as it aligns with the well-being of the majority within a species; in human beings, this culminates in a higher form of happiness, grounded in a stable sense of self and fulfilled through disinterested concern for others’ happiness.

This theoretical framework enables an extension of moral instincts beyond the human sphere, to the wider animal genus, which exhibits a lower level of participation in the same good and laws of nature. The very possibility of such an extension is ultimately grounded in the revision of the metaphysics of individual substances Leibniz undertook as of the end of the 1670s through the reappraisal of the substantial forms.¹⁵ Among other consequences, this new metaphysical account led him to attribute to animals genuine indestructible souls, sensibility, and, accordingly, experiences of pleasure and pain, implying the abandonment of the Cartesian doctrine of the animal-machine. In the NE the combination of this ontological revision with the notion of instinct also enabled a more literal reintegration of animals within the scope of natural law and morality: indeed, it allows Leibniz to realign his view of morality more strongly than in *Tit. I* to Ulpian’s definition of natural law. In fact, Leibniz claims that, besides the primary utilitarian and ‘selfish’ instincts towards the preservation of one’s life and body,

Nature instils in man and even in most of the animals an affection and gentleness towards the members of their own species [...]; In addition to this general social instinct, which can be called philanthropy in man, there are more particular ones such as the affection, between male and female, the love of fathers and mothers for their offspring, which the Greeks called *storgé*, and other similar inclinations. These make up that natural law [...] which the Roman jurists say that nature has taught to the animals. But in man in particular there is a certain concern for dignity and propriety which induces us to conceal things which degrade us, to value modesty, to loathe incest, to bury corpses, and not to eat men at all or beasts when they are alive. It also leads us to look after our reputations, even beyond the point where this serves our needs and beyond the end of life; to be subject to remorse and to feel those *laniatus et ictus* – those tortures and agonies – which Tacitus speaks of (following Plato), in addition to the fear, which also comes naturally enough, of a hereafter and of a supreme power.¹⁶

14. Leibniz defines instinct as “an inclination which an animal has – with no conception of the reason for it – towards something which is suitable to it” NE 351. See Poser 2008; Jorgensen 2016; Roinila 2019.

15. Cf. A VI, 4, 2009. See Fichant 1998: 163 ff.

16. NE 93-94.

Hence, drawing on Aquinas¹⁷ and the zoological tradition rooted in Aristotle,¹⁸ Leibniz emphasizes affective bonds between male and female, as well as between parents and offspring (*philostorgēia*). However, sociability instincts in the human species – what Leibniz terms ‘philanthropy’ – are more perfect than those found in non-human animal species in at least three respects:

1. *Interspecificity*. Human social instincts can extend beyond the boundaries of the human species, insofar as human beings are capable of feeling compassion for non-human animals in pain and to perceive the dignity of sentient living beings (and, for example, of refusing to eat living creatures). By contrast, animals appear to possess primarily intraspecific social instincts, while interspecific compassion occurs only accidentally.

2. *Reflexivity*. By virtue of possessing the idea of the self, human minds are capable of knowing themselves both as moral subjects and as moral objects. Thus, in addition to feeling their own pain and mirroring the pain of others by making them objects of compassion, human beings can also experience themselves as objects of compassion from a second-order perspective. This reflexive structure underlies *amor sui* as well as passions such as pride and concern for one’s reputation.

3. *Remorse*. Unlike non-human animals, when human beings act against their natural social instincts, they (provided they are not corrupted by anti-natural customs) experience remorse in the form of a pain-like state. In the *NE*, Leibniz employs the Cartesian expression *remorse de la conscience* without endorsing the defining features of the Cartesian account. In particular, he does not place remorse at the level of reflective consciousness or associate it with the experience of doubt: remorse remains, for Leibniz, primarily an affective phenomenon, and to emphasize its quasi-physical pain-based nature he appeals to the same hendiadys ‘laniatus et ictus’ employed for qualifying the *conscientiae stimulus* in the *Tit. I*.

The socio-moral superiority of human spirits over animal souls hinges entirely on the possession of reflection as a higher cognitive capacity. Reflection ‘overwrites’ mere memory – as the capacity, shared with all substances, of retaining past impressions – and reminiscence – as the capacity, shared with animals, to revive apperceptively previous perceptions –, making possible a uniquely human form of remembering:¹⁹ the “*souvenir*”. This self-based kind of memory enables minds to recognize themselves as the same subject of perceptions experienced before. This feeling of being the same throughout time and the owner of memories through a “mediating bond of consciousness (*consciosité*)” underpins moral responsibility and responsiveness to punishment and reward, ultimately grounding the moral relations with God at the basis of the immortality of human souls.²⁰

17. ST I-II, q. 94, a 2.

18. Aristotle, *Hist. An.* 611a and 612b-613a.

19. NE 106.

20. NE 236.

4. CONCLUSIVE REMARKS

In light of the texts examined in the previous sections, a number of conceptual and terminological continuities and transformations can be identified in the development of Leibniz's account of natural piety:

<i>Tit. I, De jure et iustitia</i> (1677-1678)	<i>Nouveaux essais</i> (1703-1705)	
HUMAN GENUS	ANIMAL GENUS	HUMAN SPECIES
<i>Affectus hominis erga hominem</i>	<i>Affection et douceur pour ceux de leur espece</i>	<i>Instinct qui port l'homme à aimer l'homme</i>
<i>Sensus humanitatis</i>	<i>Instinct generale de societé</i>	<i>Instinct de l'humanité, philanthropie</i>
<i>Tangimur alienis malis, aliena felicitate delectamur</i>	<i>affection entre le mâle et la femelle</i> <i>amour que les peres et les meres portent à leurs enfans (storghé)</i>	<i>soin de: la dignité, la convenance, la pudeur, *la pitié* (ensevelir les cadavres), la reputation</i> <i>repugnance de: l'inceste, de manger des hommes ou des bêtes vivantes</i>
<i>Stimulus conscientiae</i>	x	<i>Remors de la conscience</i>
<i>Laniatus et ictus</i>	x	<i>Laniatus et ictus</i>

The first relevant transition in the way of dealing with natural piety concerns the disciplinary absorption of natural law within the scope of moral gnoseology. The second concerns a shift in the metaphysical status of non-human animals, which move from being conceived as machines endowed with merely external sensibility to being recognized as genuine souls. As endowed with real souls, non-human animals are re-integrated into a normative moral order as bearers of practical instincts, participating – albeit at a lower level – in the same natural order of the good governed by divine laws.

These two developments are deeply interconnected: the extension of elements of natural piety to the animal genus in the NE brings Leibniz back into alignment with his commitment to Ulpian's definition of natural law as common to all animals. This extension, however, should not be understood as attributing full moral agency to animals, but rather as recognizing in them a form of normative participation in the good grounded in instinct.

In much the same way, it does not erase the moral asymmetry between humans and animals. Rather, it relocates it within a reconfigured notion of moral personhood. Animals, though now endowed with indestructible souls, sensibility, and practical instincts, lack the reflexive identity required for moral subjecthood and immortality. They may therefore be regarded, within the animal genus, as 'proto-moral' agents, and, from the human standpoint, as moral objects, but not as moral subjects.

What ultimately changes is not merely the extension of sensibility, but the criterion of moral personhood itself: these shifts in the architecture of natural piety testify to Leibniz's mature abandonment of an early conception of the person that includes sensibility among its defining features, in favor of a reflection-based account centered on self-consciousness and personal memory.²¹

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This paper forms part of the research outcomes produced within the framework of the project PRIN 2020 *Compassion in Action. Theories of Sympathy and Construction of Otherness in the Long Eighteenth Century* (2020KL3S9H_005).

ABBREVIATIONS

- A = G. W. Leibniz, *Sämtliche Schriften und Briefe*, Darmstadt & Leipzig & Berlin, Akademie Verlag, 1923-.
- AT = *Œuvres De Descartes*, éd. par Ch. Adam et P. Tannery, 12 vols., Paris, Cerf, 1897-1913.
- GP = *Die philosophischen Schriften von Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz*, hrsg. von C. I. Gerhardt, 7 vols., Berlin, Weidmann, 1875-1890; repr. Hildesheim, Georg Olms, 1978.
- L = G. W. Leibniz, *Philosophical Papers and Letters*, transl. and ed. by L. E. Loemker, Dordrecht, Reidel, 1969.
- NE = G. W. Leibniz, *Nouveaux Essais sur l'Entendement humain*, A VI, 6, 39-528; Eng. transl. *New Essays on Human Understanding*, by P. Remnant and J. Bennett, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1996.

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21. On Leibniz's notion of person, see Thiel 2019.

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