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The Leibnizian foundations of the eighteenth-century debate on the justification of principles: The problem of the meaning of metaphysics

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Abstract

The reception of Leibniz encompasses a wide range of authors influenced by his work, such as Wolff, Crusius, and Kant. In this article, I will address the problem of the reception of Leibniz's theory of principles in the context of the debate that arose during the eighteenth century about the meaning and purpose of metaphysics. I will argue that the different positions in the debate can be traced back to a characteristic of Leibnizian philosophy, namely, the functional complexity of principles such as the Principle of Sufficient Reason. This could help to improve the interpretation of (1) the difficulties of the Wolffian approach to the alleged justification of this principle by Leibniz; and (2) the supposed ambiguity concerning Kant's interpretation of Leibniz throughout his works. By pointing out the complexity of Leibniz's approach to the Principle of Sufficient Reason, we can observe the transition (even the proximity) between the Leibnizian and Kantian positions about the principles of human understanding. This could help not only to improve the current interpretation of Leibniz but also to give a clearer picture of the philosophical background against which Kant built his critique of dogmatic metaphysics.

1 | INTRODUCTION

Modern philosophy has offered a multitude of relevant contributions in a wide variety of disciplines. In the history of philosophy, it is essential to study the origin of these contributions, insofar as they always entail a rich context of production that is very useful in academic research. The context of production does involve both the theoretical and practical elements that contribute to the development of certain ideas, but also the indeterminacies, debates, and ruptures that underlie this development too. Such contributions abound in the philosophy and

science of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, and certain fields such as metaphysics and epistemology are no exception, as they were particularly relevant disciplines both in their disputes and in their conclusions. One of the most relevant debates in this context arose from the question about the meaning of metaphysics. Since Aristotle, metaphysics has been understood as an inquiry about the first causes and principles of things (see Ross, 1997, I, p. 119). The principles, understood as the ultimate elements of the real, are the main object of this discipline. For this reason, a large part of the philosophical tradition has understood that the primary task of philosophy is to be a reflection on principles, whether they refer to things as existing entities or to the structure of human understanding, that is, whether they are considered as existential or epistemological principles. The different understandings of the principles of rationality and the relation between them gave rise to an important debate in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries concerning the precise meaning of metaphysics.[1]

Some of the most prominent authors of these centuries—including Leibniz, Wolff, Crusius, and Kant—were involved in this debate. In this context, to inquire about the meaning of metaphysics is to inquire about the different principles of human knowledge, about their interrelation and scope, as well as about the role of the empirical sciences in this kind of research.[2] The various responses to the question of the hierarchy and justification of the principles of human understanding are also answers to how both the object and the boundaries of metaphysics are to be understood. According to Wolff, metaphysics is to be conceived as the study of the possibility of entities. This results from the author's deductive and hierarchical understanding of the principles of rationality. In the Wolffian system, the principle of noncontradiction (PNC, hereafter) holds a prominent position in the deductive order, as opposed to other principles such as the principle of sufficient reason (PSR, hereafter). This does not imply, however, that Wolff's metaphysics just poses as a modal theory related to the possibility of beings. Rather, Wolff holds that metaphysics is a legitimate scientific discipline and may discuss actual substances found in the real world. Thus, it is not surprising that years later, Kant brings up the idea of "metaphysics as a science" precisely in relation to a particular understanding of the boundaries, applicability, and validity of the principles of human understanding, which is represented by the Leibniz heirs and is known as the Leibniz-Wolffian philosophy. Kant claims that they are dogmatic authors insofar as they incur in a confusion between the different uses of the understanding; an exemplary case is that of Wolff, in whose metaphysics we find an exposition about real beings from mere concepts of the understanding (see Kant, [1781] 1998, B329). However, the question of the hierarchy and justification of the principles of rationality is not only relevant in historical terms. Since antiquity, this issue has been a focal point of the philosophical debate, given its relevance in the various fields of philosophy. The type of philosophy we are dealing with is determined by how we understand the concept of principle, the kinds of relationships that are made between the different principles, and the ontological scope that may be analyzed using some or all of the principles.

The purpose of this article is to study the Leibnizian foundations of the debate on the meaning and purpose of metaphysics in relation to the debate on the justification of the principles of rationality. Although this debate begins in Wolff's philosophy, it is also true that a substantial number of the ideas that shape the Wolffian approach are rooted in the reception and interpretation of the theses found in Leibnizian philosophy (see Brown, 1994; Coves, 2009, p. 401ff.). In this article, I will argue that the debate on the justification of principles in the eighteenth century has its origin in the functional complexity of certain principles in Leibnizian philosophy; by "functional complexity" I refer to the dual role that principles like the PSR play within the Leibnizian system. This

[1]For example, Kant will introduce the concept of "transcendental cognition" at the core of this discussion (see Sánchez-Rodríguez, 2023). Perin has offered a thorough analysis about the context of the debate concerning the proof of the Principle of Sufficient Reason in Wolff's philosophy and some of the responses to this position (see Perin, 2015).

[2]The case of Émilie Du Châtelet is a very interesting example of the link between the problem of the justification of the principles and the scope of application and development of the sciences (see Wells, 2023).

dual function refers to this principle acting as both an empirical principle (providing a clear understanding of the connection between matters of fact) and an ontological principle, serving as one of the conditions under which the human intellect must think the real. While the former suggests a deductive model of justification in its relationship to other principles, such as the PNC, the latter seems to introduce a different model that bridges Leibniz's and Kant's accounts on the PSR. The primary source of complexity here is that, although Leibniz applies the principle in both senses (as I will show), he does not come to clearly distinguish between these functions or applications.

There are a few textual foundations that can help us to understand the influence of Leibniz not only in the formulation of Wolff's theses but also in some of the critical responses that Wolff received during the eighteenth century, such as Crusius's and Kant's. In this regard, the study of the roots of the controversy about the meaning and purpose of metaphysics must also consider Leibniz as a precedent for the general evolution of this debate. This recognition also implies the insistence on the autonomy and value of Leibnizian thought, independent of the different readings that the philosophical tradition has made of it. As this article will show, there are some principles in Leibnizian philosophy that do not lend themselves to being interpreted according to a strictly deductive scheme but rather fulfill a broader function since they determine the intellectual conditions of the exercise of rationality. The openness toward the functional complexity of the principles allows us to go further into an interpretation of Leibnizian principlism in a transcendental key, which would be a very valuable contribution to the current research on the author. From a historical and comparative perspective, this feature of the Leibnizian principlism allows us to trace the influence of Leibniz's philosophy in the debate on the meaning of metaphysics without limiting ourselves to the reception of Leibniz's theses by the Leibniz-Wolffian tradition.

The article will follow this structure: first, I will discuss the problem of conceptualizing what Leibniz means by "principle." This will allow me to point out some of the key features regarding the functional complexity and the meanings of certain principles in Leibniz's thought, such as the PSR. Finally, I will deal with the influence of this functional complexity within the framework of Wolff's interpretation of Leibnizian philosophy and the different critics of the Wolffian approach during the eighteenth century. Specifically, I will focus on the Kantian critique and the evolution of Kant's position toward Leibniz during the different periods of his philosophical production.

2 | THE CONCEPT OF "PRINCIPLE" IN LEIBNIZIAN PHILOSOPHY: THE MEANINGS OF THE GREAT PRINCIPLES OF REASONING

In order to clarify the basis of the controversy from the perspective of Leibniz's philosophy, in this section I will focus on some relevant aspects of the concept of "principle" in the framework of Leibniz's thought. This will provide us with fundamental elements from a heuristic point of view, insofar as they help us to understand the development of the debate on the meaning of metaphysics in the eighteenth century.

Principles play a key role in the general system of Leibniz's philosophy. The Leibnizian conception of principles is essentially linked to his theory of rationality and, by extension, to his philosophical system in general. One can even go so far as to say that this theory constitutes the very skeleton of his philosophical system. However, both the Leibnizian conception of principles and his theory of rationality did not remain unchanged throughout his life. The transverse presence of principles in the diversity of the philosopher's writings causes certain difficulties regarding the detection of their defining features.[3] This issue is accredited by a

[3]In another work I comment on some of the problems derived from the historical character and the transverse presence of the principles in Leibniz's thought (see Gutiérrez-García, 2022).

multitude of Leibnizian writings, from the earliest, such as the *Metaphysical Dissertation on the Principle of Individuation* (1663), to his last writings. The several appearances and uses of the concept of principle throughout Leibniz's intellectual development are almost unmanageable: Leibniz employs his philosophical principles in discussions on a wide variety of subjects, such as jurisprudence, physics, mathematics, or medicine. The field of application of the principles is thus not restricted to the areas of epistemology and metaphysics. The evolution of the concept of principle and its spectrum of application constitutes the very first difficulty in defining the key features of principles in Leibniz's philosophy. However, it is possible to give a general definition of the concept of principle regarding some of its functions. As Rescher suggests, "principles provide as guides to understanding what it is that one should think and do in matters of rational procedure. They are sign-posts that point us in the direction of the demands of reason" (Rescher, 2010, p. 72).

Rationality and principlism are two elements that converge in Leibnizian philosophy. On one hand, principles are meant to be the fundamental tool that we use to gain cognitive access to the world; that is, they are the instrument that makes possible the rational exercise of knowledge. Moreover, in Leibniz we find an identification between the orders of rationality and reality that functions as a general presupposition in his thought; the same happens with other authors of Modernity, and it is Hegel with whom this issue reaches its culmination (see Rescher, 2010, pp. 110–111). To say that we understand the world rationally is to say that the world is ordered according to principles. The confused and finite perception we have of these principles does not hinder their validity, insofar as it is a perception that remains in continuity with the absolute perspective of divine understanding.[4] The idea of "symbolic knowledge" in the *New Essays* expresses this relationship well. For Leibniz, principles are as necessary to the spirit as the muscles are to the body:

> For our thoughts are permeated by the general principles which animate them and bind them together; though we may not be aware of them, they are as necessary to them as muscles and sinews are to walking. The spirit constantly relies on these principles, but it is not easy for it to discern them and to represent them to itself distinctly and separately.
>
> (AA, VI, 6, 83–84)

The rational ordering of the world is grounded in the common structure provided by principles of understanding, which play a leading role both in epistemological and causal regards. This approach, for instance, clarifies the disagreement between Leibniz and Arnauld concerning the issue of the notion of a particular individual. What Leibniz holds is that the notion of a particular individual (namely, the predicates contained in its concept) has far-reaching implications for the series of all events and, in short, for the real world as a whole. Thus, when God creates the world, He does so not by an arbitrary resolution, but according to the rule provided by His own understanding, which represents the complete expression of those principles He shares with the human understanding, albeit in a limited and finite form for humans.[5] Only by considering this continuity can we address Arnauld's

[4]In this regard, the relevance of the concept of "individual substance" and the conformity foundation that is settled in the adequacy between finite knowledge and the divine view of the real must be pointed out. The contrast between the divine and human viewpoints reveals a conformity that, on the epistemological level, takes place between a confused and incomplete knowledge and a clear, distinct, and intuitive knowledge of reality. Without this hypothetically presupposed universality, one cannot understand the validity of the principles in rationality, which is both one and perspectivistically situated (see Sánchez-Rodríguez, 2013, pp. 274–277; see also, note 5).

[5]As Brandon Look states, "Leibniz's concept containment theory of truth follows from his commitments to divine omniscience. . . And insofar as God is omniscient . . . and his intellect is, like ours, discursive, the world is ordered and intelligible" (Look, 2011, p. 209).

objection in his correspondence with Leibniz, where he contends that "the divine understanding is the rule of truth of things as to themselves," but it is not the rule "as to us" (GP, II, 31).

In this sense, principles constitute for Leibniz the ultimate formality of the real, insofar as, *ex hypothesi*, the world is rationally ordered. The logical dimension of principled analysis comes together with (but is distinct from) the metaphysical dimension. The metaphysical dimension governs the way in which principles articulate the elements of the real world. Each principle may be considered from the point of view of both dimensions.[6] In the *Dialogue Between a Theologian and a Mysosophist* (1677), Leibniz states the following:

> There are principles which are common to divine and human things, and this has been well observed by theologians. But logical and metaphysical principles are common to divine and human things because they govern in the sphere of truth and being in general.[7]
>
> (AA, VI, 4, 2215)

The PNC is adduced by Leibniz as a paradigmatic example of these logical and metaphysical principles already present in this text dating from 1677. This principle not only refers to the logical relation between subject and predicate but is also a principle that defines the identity of a being with respect to itself (See *Animadversions*, GP, IV, 357; *Theodicy*, GP, VI, 414; Leibniz's second letter to Clarke, GP, VII, 355). The principle of continuity, for example, express both the physical law proclaiming the absence of jumps in nature and the relationship between the elements of a logical series (see de Moreira, 2019, pp. 367–466).

The many formulations of the PSR already incorporate the mentioned logical and metaphysical dimensions. An example of this can be found in the *Monadology*, that, by virtue of this principle, we do not only consider facts to exist but also true statements "without a sufficient reason for it to be so and not otherwise" (GP, VI, §32, 612).

The main reason why the PSR is so significant in this framework is the functional complexity it shows regarding the different models in which this principle is used and justified. This complexity becomes apparent when we consider the roles and functions the PSR fulfills within the general scheme of ordering and justifying principles in the Leibnizian system. From this chart, first we observe that this principle is justified according to two different models: a classical or deductive model and an ontological model. Both converge in Leibniz's thought, allowing us to identify two senses or functions of the principle that are imbricated: a causal function and an ontological function.[8] The classical model of justification is deductive, in which principles are considered in terms of their hierarchical interrelation. This model converges with another in which principles act as the very condition of intelligibility of the real. The main source of complexity lies here in the fact that Leibniz does not clearly demarcate these models (and, consequently, these functions), though he

[6]Ritter and Gründer point out this topic in connection with the PNC and the PSR (see Ritter & Gründer, 1971, p. 1360). Lalanne links the Leibnizian account of the multiple formulations of the real with the several formulations of the principles, especially in the case of the PSR (see Lalanne, 2018, pp. 89–91).

[7]In the manuscript (LH 1, 6, 6 Bl. 1v), Leibniz writes only "metaphysical principles" in the last sentence, but later he adds "Logical and" in the margin before "metaphysical." Hence, in some translations we may find only the mention of metaphysicians (see Leibniz, 2019, p. 142). However, without the allusion to logical principles, both the sentence and its antecedent lose their meaning.

[8]Although in this article I will only refer to these functions regarding the PSR, some studies suggest this model in relation to the PNC (see Parkinson, 1992, p. xvff.).

uses them as such in different contexts.[9] For instance, the classical model can be found in some of the mature texts, such as *Commentaries on Stegmann's Metaphysics of Unitarians* (1708–10), where Leibniz attempts to create a taxonomy of the sciences, establishing a hierarchical order based on the governing principles of each (cf. Jolley, 1975). From this outlook, the last link in the deductive order is represented by the infinite substance (God), whose existence is ultimately demonstrated by the PSR. As Leibniz points out in his *Metaphysical Consequences of the Principle of Reason* (1708):

> The existence of contingent things must ultimately be sought outside of matter, in a necessary cause, whose reason for existing, in fact, is not beyond, outside of itself; which, for this reason, must be spiritual, that is, a mind, and moreover most perfect, since, due to the nexus of things, it extends to everything.[10]
>
> (C, 13)

As stated before, this model is just one of the iterations in which Leibniz employs the PSR. In addition to this, we find a model that will certainly reappear in Kant; that is, an ontological model. What "ontological" means here is that principles (from this specific outlook) are to be considered as the condition under which the human intellect must think the real. According to this model, the principles articulate the structure of the real and allow us to experience the concordance of the empirical world. This includes a clear epistemological component, as principles provide intelligibility. However, it also pertains to how this world is structured, since, for Leibniz, there is no clear distinction between the two orders. Many passages where Leibniz adopts this approach are those in which he describes phenomena as "well-founded" and employs a particular type of counterfactual argument regarding the concordance of empirical reality. This concordance, moreover, is enabled by principles that are shared between divine and human reason—principles that refer not only to the elements of understanding but also to reality itself (see note 4). For example, in *On the Method of Distinguishing Real from Imaginary Phenomena* (c. 1684), Leibniz states:

> What if our nature lacks the capacity for real phenomena? In such a case, God should certainly not be blamed so much as thanked, for by making those phenomena, which cannot be real, at least agreeable, he has granted us that they have the same value as real phenomena in the general experience of life.
>
> (GP, VII, 321)

Once these models are introduced, we will proceed with the two different senses or functions of the PSR, as the former allows us to detect the latter. The PSR can be understood, in the first place, as a principle of causality. According to this function, the principle acts as the law that helps in designating the link between phenomena. This sense of the principle is particularly noticeable in its relation to the PNC. These two principles, the two great principles

[9]This complexity is especially important from the standpoint of Leibniz's reception, where philosophical nuances are inseparable from historiography. As some works have previously noted, the current edition of Leibniz's works is itself an issue that concerns its reception (cf. Lorenz, 2007). Furthermore, the reception of Leibniz's works in the early eighteenth century is marked by many gaps, to the point that some of his contemporaries viewed him as an unproductive thinker (cf. Gädeke, 2017, p. 132). Although this historiographical factor helps to account for the diverse interpretations of Leibnizian philosophy, it does not fully explain why specific interpretations emerged. Here, I believe it would be helpful to consider philosophical factors, such as the functional complexity of the PSR. Though the Wolffian interpretation was the most prominent in the early eighteenth century, some authors, like Hansch, read Leibniz from a non-Wolffian perspective, as Stephan Lorenz has pointed out (see Lorenz, 2016).

[10]The same idea is pointed out by Du Châtelet in her *Institutions de Physique* (1740), concerning the connection between empirical investigations and its natural way of arriving at metaphysics (see Du Châtelet, 2009, pp. 138–147). I note this issue in Du Châtelet's philosophy precisely because she was one of the eighteenth-century authors who emphasized the value of the PSR in the physical sciences (cf. Brading, 2019, p. 38ff.).

of our reasoning, are formulated at different points in Leibniz's works. One of the best-known passages is that of the *Monadology*:

> Our reasoning is based on two great principles; one is that of *contradiction*, by virtue of which we judge false that which contains contradiction, and true that which is opposed to false or contradictory to false. The other is that of *sufficient reason*, by virtue of which we consider that no true or existing fact or true statement can be found without a sufficient reason for it to be so and not otherwise, even though these reasons may, in most cases, be unknown to us.
>
> (GP, VI, 612)

At first glance, the two principles do not seem to be linked. Both define—if we follow Leibniz's own words—the general structure on which our reasoning is founded. Their connection becomes clear if we consider some core elements of Leibniz's theory of truth and modal ontology. From the outlook of the theory of truth, the PNC defines a specific epistemological region: that of truths whose opposite implies a contradiction. These, Leibniz says, are the truths of reason. On the other hand, those truths whose opposite is not contradictory are the truths of fact (cf. C, 17–18). From the perspective of the Leibnizian modal ontology, truths of reason define the realm of the possible or the real. Truths of fact (governed by the PSR) delimit the realm of what actually exists (which does not strictly coincide with the real). The former possesses a kind of absolute or metaphysical necessity, as opposed to the latter, whose necessity is hypothetical or moral. Leibniz expresses this idea, for example, in the *Discourse of Metaphysics* (1686):

> I assert that the connection or attainment is of two kinds; one is absolutely necessary, the contrary of which implies contradiction, and this deduction takes place in eternal truths, such as those of geometry; the other is not necessary, except *ex hypothesi*, and so to speak, by accident, but is itself contingent, since the contrary does not imply contradiction. And this connection is founded not on the completely pure ideas and simple understanding of God, but even on his free decrees and the course of the universe.
>
> (AA, VI, 4, 1546–1547)

Truths of reason are necessary in an absolute sense; that is, there can be no world in which they are not accomplished. However, one important problem arises when we consider the truths of fact. The contrary of a factual truth is possible, it is not contradictory, so there must be a sufficient reason for that factual truth to exist rather than another.[11] Accordingly, all possible worlds are absolutely necessary to the same degree,[12] but only one (that which actually exists) is hypothetically necessary, insofar as it is the result of God's will, which is inclined toward the best. In a letter from Leibniz to Landgrave Ernst for Arnauld dating from April 12, 1686, Leibniz states that, if God "acted otherwise, he would not act as God" (F, 34).

[11]In this passage dating c. 1677, Leibniz states: "The absolute first truths are the identical among the truths of reason and, among the truths of fact, the following . . ., that is, everything possible demands to exist and, therefore, would come to exist unless it is prevented by something else that also demands to exist and that is incompatible with the previous one" (GP, VII, 194). Precisely, Leibniz notes in the margin of the manuscript (according to GP) the following: "Veritatis definitio realis est" (The real is the definition of truth); namely, everything possible is true insofar as it is not contradictory.

[12]Here, I refer to "absolute necessity," as opposed to "hypothetical necessity"; in this passage from 1677, Leibniz argues that either things demand to exist and therefore do, or rather "some things do not exist, and then there must be a reason why some things exist instead of others" (GP, VII, 194). This means that, from the standpoint of logical necessity, all worlds are equally necessary; however, the reason one world exists rather than another lies in God's moral decree, which is made according to specific criteria (see note 13).

This scheme seems to suggest a certain subordination of the PSR to the PNC, since the latter establishes the general field of phenomena or truths for which the PSR can give reason. Here, the PSR is the principle that provides the reason for the connection between the truths of fact and also the moral reason that this world is the only one that exists among all the possible ones, which are defined by the PNC. However, the PSR has a much broader function in the Leibnizian system.

The PSR can also be understood in an ontological sense. As far as this sense is concerned, the PSR does not always consist—for Leibniz—in getting to the simplest elements, but to those whose truth we cannot doubt about (at least not without calling into question our whole general system of knowledge). This kind of function is to be seen in some texts, such as the *Demonstration of Primary Propositions* (1671–1672), where Leibniz claims: "And yet, by eliminating the absolute and rigorous universality of these propositions, the certainty of all the propositions that the human spirit has discovered has been called into question" (AA, VI, 2, 480; see Harrop, 2020, p. 158). In this regard, the PSR acts as the epistemological foundation of the intelligibility of the real. At this level the principle is not justified by means of a prior cause, but by way of understanding it as the very reason of objectivity, as that which allows phenomena to be intelligible for us.

One could even say that this is the sense in which later philosophy employs the term "teleology"; however, certain clarifications are necessary in this regard. The concept of teleology is loaded with meaning in the history of philosophy. It is therefore helpful to distinguish between two different senses of teleology (if we may indeed refer to this function of the PSR as teleological). It is not the same kind of teleology that ascribes final causes to the real in an objective sense (as in the case of Aristotle) compared to teleology understood in a subjective sense (as in the case of Kant), in which it refers to the way in which we must think of the real as objective. The sense I am particularly referring to here is the second one; that is the reason why I choose the term "ontological," since it helps in pointing out at teleology here as the very reason of objectivity.

However, the first sense of the concept is actually not abandoned by Leibniz, though the example of this use is very well-placed in Leibniz's *Theodicy*, where the PSR is understood as the principle of the best. Leibniz uses the principle of the best to explain God's choice between the possible worlds in order to bring into existence the best of them (see *Discourse of Metaphysics*, §19, AA, VI, 4, 1560–1561; *Theodicy* I, §44–45, GP, VI, 128ff.). In this usage, the principle involves causal language; however, this form of causality does not pertain to phenomena but rather to the moral cause for the existence of this world over any other. The principle can be formulated as follows: if we assume as a hypothesis the existence of a God like the Christian God, we must think of him as acting not by virtue of a mechanical or instrumental cause but by virtue of a moral cause. And this moral cause can be none other than his choice of the best of all possible worlds, namely, the world that involves the greatest amount of Good.[13] The moral determination of the divine will is the reason why this world exists and not another, which is why we can think of the principle of the best as an example or (universal) specification of the PSR.[14] Once we take this world as a given reality, the divine choice of the world with the greatest amount of Good is the only reason we can think

[13]Leibniz states that "God does not fail to choose the best" (*Theodicy* I, §45, GP, VI, 128), though this decision does not imply "metaphysical necessity." Later, however, this choice is described as grounded in the "simplicity of means" (see *Theodicy* I, §208, GP, VI, 244). This simplicity of means is associated with the most beautiful and pleasing, the most perfect choice—even though this overall perfection does not necessarily imply perfection in each individual part. This distinction is central to the argument concerning metaphysical Good versus physical and moral Bad.

[14]I endorse Parkinson's approach, which states that the principle of the best should be understood in this way, as an exemplification of the PSR. However, the author notes that it must be borne in mind that the principle of the best is universal in its application, whereas the PSR concerns contingent truths (cf. Parkinson, 1992, p. xxv).

of to make phenomena intelligible.[15] Otherwise, as previously mentioned, God "would not act as God" (F, 34).

In any case, the PSR no longer appears here as a principle of causality but as the "great principle of reason," as Leibniz declares to Clarke (see Leibniz's fifth letter to Clarke, GP, VII, 395). The distinction between the causal and ontological functions of the PSR is formulated in various texts of the Leibnizian corpus. For instance, in §7 from the *Principles of Nature and Grace* (1714), we read:

> So far we have spoken only as mere *physicists*; now we must rise to *metaphysics*, by means of the *great principle*, not very commonly employed, which holds *that nothing is done without sufficient reason*, that is to say, that nothing happens without it being possible for one who has sufficient knowledge of things to give a reason sufficient to determine why it is so and not otherwise. Once this principle has been established, the first question that one is entitled to ask is *why there is something instead of nothing*. For nothing is simpler and easier than something. Moreover, supposing that things must exist, it is necessary to be able to give a reason *why they must exist this way* and not in some other way.
>
> (GP, VI, 602)

The distinction we observe in this passage is not merely between the realms of physics and metaphysics but also between the different formulations and applications of PSR in each realm. Once the principle is "established," says Leibniz, two questions arise: (1) *Why there is something instead of nothing?* and (2) *Why* do things that *exist must exist this way* and not in some other way? The second question only makes sense once the first question is answered in the affirmative. And this answer, this assumption "that things must exist," is provided by the intervention of the PSR; that is, once we accept the consequences of the principle of the best (the moral reason for this world to exist rather than another) and the hypothetical necessity of the world's existence, we can ask about the causes of why the things that exist in this world do so in one way or another. The latter is the only question the physicist is entitled to ask, where the PSR functions as a principle of causality. But the metaphysician must think of this principle in a more general sense, an ontological sense, in which the intervention of the principle makes it possible for phenomena to appear to us as concordant, in a cohesive and unitary world, which is also the product of God's free will oriented toward the Good.

The functional complexity of PSR also helps explain the fact that many of the uses and formulations of the PSR do not involve causal language at all[16] (cf. Mercer, 2001, p. 341).[17] For Leibniz, there is a fundamental difference between "cause" and "reason," which can be explained precisely by these different functions of the PSR. Rescher highlights the presence of this distinction in the following passage from the *New Essays* (cf. Rescher, 2010, p. 108):

[15]Rescher expresses this idea regarding the theological character of the PSR: "Any gaps or rents in the fabric of rational explicability would reflect adversely on the supreme being who has created it. The status of the PSR in Leibniz is accordingly that of an ultimately theological principle" (Rescher, 2010, p. 111).

[16]In fact, there are some examples in physics and mathematics that show the possibility of maintaining the PSR without doing the same with the principle of causality, as in the case of stochastic processes (see Rescher, 2010, p. 109ff.).

[17]According to some interpreters, there is a modification in the language with which Leibniz takes principles into consideration from the 1680s and 1690s onward. By following this modification, the causal language would disappear in favor of a language that emphasizes a more general sense or function of the principle. This is the reason why in texts prior to the *Discourse of Metaphysics* such as *First Truths* (1686) we find a subordination of the PSR with respect to other principles, such as that of inhesion, because Leibniz is here interpreting the first one in a causal sense (see C, 518–519; Leibniz, 1989, p. 31).

> *Reason* is the known truth whose relation to a less known truth enables us to assent to the latter. But in a particular way, reason par excellence demands that it be not only the cause of our judgment, but also of truth itself, which is also called *a priori reason*, and the *cause* in things corresponds to the *reason* in truths. That is why the cause itself, and in particular the final cause, is sometimes called reason.
>
> (GP, V, 457)

It is this "reason par excellence" that provides the PSR in an ontological sense. One of the paradigmatic examples where the functional complexity of this principle comes into play is the correspondence with Clarke, where there is a continuous demand on the part of the Newtonian to give a proof of the PSR.[18] This is how Wolff puts it a few years later in the *German Metaphysics* (1720), when he writes about the relevance of this principle:

> The importance of this principle . . . has been demonstrated for the first time in our days, by Herr von Leibniz by magnificent proofs both in his *Theodicy* and in the letters he has exchanged with the Englishman Clark on some disputed questions. He has accepted it as a principle based on experience against which no example can be furnished, and has therefore offered no demonstration, although Clarke demanded it.
>
> (W, III, 1, §30)

The requirement of demonstration that Wolff highlights is founded in a radically different conception of the PSR.[19] In his second letter to Leibniz, Clarke speaks about the PSR while understanding it in its causal function. In fact, he carries out a direct derivation of the law of causality from the PSR:

> It is very true, that nothing is, without a sufficient reason why it is, and why it is thus rather than otherwise. And therefore, where there is no Cause, there can be no Effect. But this sufficient Reason is oft-times no other, than the mere Will of God.
>
> (GP, VII, 359)

That distinction between reasons and causes present in the Leibnizian conception of the PSR is not to be found in Clarke's various formulations of the principle, which fall into an equivocity between the two senses. In his *Demonstration of the Existence and Attributes of God* (1705), he states the following:

> Whatever exists has a cause, a reason, a ground of its existence, a foundation on which its existence relies, a ground or reason why it does exist rather than not exist, either in the necessity of its own nature (and then it must have been of itself eternal), or in the will of some other being (and then that other being must, at least in the order of nature and causality, have existed before it).
>
> (Clarke, [1705] 1998, p. 8)

[18]It should be noted that, although Leibniz does not provide a clear distinction between the two uses, he does not equate them as Clarke does. This point is crucial for addressing Leibniz's reception in the early eighteenth century (see note 9).

[19]A straightforward way to address this is to note that, while Leibniz does view this principle as an axiom, Wolff does not. In this context, being an axiom means that the PSR does not require demonstration; it is self-evident. This self-evidence arises from the fact that one of the functions of the principle is to serve as the very condition for the intelligibility of reality. In this regard, some of Leibniz's immediate interpreters have defined the PSR as an axiom; such is the case with Hansch (see Look, 2016, p. 325; see also, note 9).

"Cause" and "reason" are used interchangeably by Clarke. For the Newtonian, the ultimate justification of the PSR is to be found in the divine will. For Leibniz, however, this Will is already an expression of the principle, but not in a causal sense. Although this Will is not determined by the same mechanical laws that connect the phenomena of the physical world, the divine Will is morally determined[20] to choose the best among all possible worlds. To observe this precisely in the correspondence, we may return to the distinction Leibniz drew in the *Principles of Nature and Grace* between these two questions: (1) *Why there is something instead of nothing?* and (2) *Why* do things that *exist must exist this way* and not in some other way? When Leibniz replies to the Newtonian, he retorts that the Newtonian is only accepting the PSR in word, but not in fact. And to accept it in fact means to accept it not only in its causal function:

> It is evident from what I have just said that my axiom has not been well understood, and that, seeming to accept it, it is rejected. *It is true*, they say, that *there is nothing without a sufficient reason why it is so rather than otherwise*, but it is added that this sufficient reason is often the simple and *mere Will of God*. . . . But just to maintain that God wills something, without there being any sufficient reason for his Will, goes against the axiom or general rule of all that happens. It is to fall back on the vague indifference which I have already widely rejected and which I have pointed out as absolutely chimerical.
>
> (GP, VII, 364–365)

According to Leibniz, what Clarke accepts is the second question, but not the first. Had the Newtonian perceived this distinction and not used the terms equivocally, he would have had to provide a sufficient reason of some kind other than the mere "Will of God." And this reason could not be mechanical, for it would leave room for brute necessity and fatalism:

> They object to me that not to admit this simple and mere Will would be to take away from God the possibility of choosing, and that this would be to fall into fatality. But the contrary is the case: the faculty of choosing is retained in God, since it is based on the reason of choosing according to wisdom. And it is not this fatality that must be avoided (which is nothing other than the order of the wisest or of providence), but a fatality or brute necessity, where there is neither wisdom nor choice.
>
> (GP, VII, 365)

To conclude this section, it is urgent to point out that these two senses of the PSR also allow us to understand a concept of vital importance in the Leibnizian system, that of "real metaphysics." In his fourth letter to Clarke from June 2, 1716, Leibniz says that these principles (the PSR and the principle of identity of indiscernibles) "change the state of metaphysics, which by means of them becomes real and demonstrative, whereas before it consisted only of empty terms" (GP, VII, 372).[21] In this strict sense of metaphysics (see GP, VII, 371–378), we are faced with a science purified of chimeras in which the philosophical reflection could end up starting

[20]This determination lies neither outside God's essence nor hinders God's freedom. As Leibniz argues in response to Clarke's accusations: "the faculty of choosing is retained in God, since it is based on the reason for choosing according to wisdom" (GP, VII, 365).

[21]The concept of "real metaphysics" will be inherited by the later tradition (cf. Lodge, 2010, pp. 13–36; Rutherford, 1995, pp. 71–98). The occurrences of this exact expression ("Metaphysique reelle") are located in some of Leibniz's works (see *New Essays*, AA, VI, 6, 431; Fourth letter to Clarke, GP, VII, 372). However, there are other passages where Leibniz refers to the same concept with partially different expressions: for example, "veritable metaphysique" and "vraye Metaphysique" (see, respectively, Letter to Malebranche, December 27, 1694, GP, I, 352; and *New Essays*, AA, VI, 6, 209).

with a biased conception of principles. An example of these chimeras is mentioned by Leibniz in the third letter to Clarke (quoted above): the fatality or brute necessity, that is, the philosophical and theological problem of determinism.

3 | THE DEBATE ON THE HIERARCHY AND JUSTIFICATION OF PRINCIPLES IN THE EIGHTEENTH CENTURY

The causal and ontological senses of the PSR converge in the Leibnizian system and make this principle both complex and relevant, as previously noted regarding its functional complexity in the correspondence with Clarke. Neglecting this complexity concerning Leibnizian principism can not only lead us to chimerical theses but also to a misunderstanding of Leibniz's philosophy. This complexity can also help us to identify the positions of one of the most relevant debates that took place in the eighteenth century, namely the debate on the specific task of metaphysics.

For some of Leibniz's interpreters and immediate heirs during the eighteenth century, the PSR is to be understood in a very similar way to that of the Newtonian Clarke, namely, as a principle to understand the link between the phenomena, as a principle of causality. In the passage from the *German Metaphysics* quoted above, we could read Wolff's dissatisfaction with what he finds in the correspondence between Leibniz and Clarke, since he fails to find any justification or demonstration of the PSR by Leibniz. Not finding any justification of the PSR, Wolff himself attempts to provide it in his work; thus, Wolffian philosophy settles the foundations of a debate that will play a fundamental role in the philosophical discussions of the eighteenth century. In a general sense, this debate concerns the problem of the task of metaphysics. But on a more specific level, the debate concerns the problem of the justification of principles such as the PNC or the PSR. Figures such as Wolff himself, Baumgarten, Crusius, and Kant will be involved in this debate.[22] In §30 of the *German Metaphysics* we find the Wolffian demonstration of the PSR:

> Something that is, and of which it is possible to understand that it is, necessarily has a sufficient reason (§29). Thus, where there is nothing, it is not possible to understand out of nothing why something is, that is, why it has become real or come to be out of nothing. That which cannot come from nothing must have a sufficient reason by means of which is, just as it must itself be possible and have a cause that brings it into existence if it concerns non necessary things. Thus, since it is impossible that anything can come from nothing (§29), everything that exists must have a sufficient reason by means of which it is; that is, there must always be a reason by which it is possible to understand why that thing can be made real (§29). We will call this the principle of sufficient reason.
>
> (W, III, 1, §30)

This paragraph is crucial to understand the divergences of the Wolffian position with respect to the postulates of Leibniz's philosophy. First, the concept of "real" in Leibniz is defined by those necessary truths that are the result of the application of the PNC, but Wolff is identifying the real here with the existent. Secondly, the different senses or functions of the PSR are neither distinguished nor used as such in Wolff's formulation: as we have seen before, if we take the PSR in its ontological sense, it is not possible to establish a deductive justification (from an a priori element) of this principle. However, it is this ontological sense that Wolff seems to take

[22]Though in this article I focus on tracing the Leibnizian origin of the controversy, a detailed analysis of it can be found in the great work made by Perin (see Perin, 2015).

up in his formulation (as he writes: "it is impossible that anything can come from nothing"), but he does so in the context of an attempt to justify or demonstrate the principle.[23]

Wolfff's persistence in justifying the PSR is indeed contrary to the Leibnizian approach to the principle in its ontological sense. Thus, it is not surprising that some of Wolff's contemporaries already expressed their opposition to this approach. Crusius highlights the impossibility of deriving the PSR from the PNC. In his *Philosophical Dissertation on the Use and Limits of the Principle of Determining (or commonly) Sufficient Reason* (1743),[24] he states the following:

> We can go further and show that the principle of determining reason cannot be demonstrated purely from the principle of contradiction. The most insightful Leibniz clearly saw this and therefore declined to demonstrate it, although the illustrious Wolff, believing it an easy task, thought he could accomplish it but made a human error. For the principle of contradiction is a completely identical proposition, and thus, insofar as it can be applied, it must be that we are speaking of one and the same thing in one and the same respect and at one and the same time. Therefore, no question that arises concerning causes and effects, principles . . . that can be decided by that principle alone, unless another principle, different and independent from it, is assumed.
>
> (CPH, VI.I, §XIV)

In his *Sketch of the Necessary Truths of Reason* (1745), Crusius also addresses the problem of the distinction between the different functions of the principles in the proof that Wolff offers about the PSR (cf. Perin, 2015, p. 521). In fact, he also holds here a very interesting distinction between causes in a "strict sense" and causes in a "broad sense" (that is, reasons). This distinction is very close to the one we have previously discussed in Leibniz's texts:

> Everything that brings about something else either in part or in whole and insofar as it is viewed as such is called a ground or cause in the broad sense (*principium, ratio*). For that reason, efficient causes are a kind of ground, whose necessity becomes clear from the previous, §15, 29. However, they are not the only kind. For that reason, we must also learn here the remaining kinds of grounds.
>
> (CPH, II, §34)

Crusius's critique highlights the absence of any distinction in Wolff's formulation between the two senses of ground; for lack of this differentiation, Wolff attempts to leap unjustifiably from a principle referring to efficient causality between entities to a principle referring to the epistemological foundation of the general intelligibility of the real. This

[23]Various scholars have previously addressed some issues related to Wolff's demonstration of the PSR. For instance, Brandon Look specifically highlights that the Wolffian demonstration not only involves an ambiguity concerning the definition of "sufficient reason" but also risks a *petitio principii*, in the sense that some premises (such as §29) tend to presuppose the PSR (cf. Look, 2011, pp. 211–213). Even though both the PNC and the PSR play a key role in Wolffian philosophy, he does not consider the latter an axiom—that is, something that requires no demonstration and serves as a criterion of intelligibility. This interpretation of the Leibnizian approach to the PSR does not even align with the few works from Leibniz available in the early eighteenth century: "even the *Theodicy* strongly suggests that the PSR is not to be admitted as an empirical principle but rather as an innate and indubitable principle" (Look, 2011, p. 212; see also, note 19).

[24]This critique will subsequently be inherited by Kant on some of his main works (see note 28). As Rivero (2014, p. 124) claims: "Crusius's remarks were pointing the way ahead of Kant's aim in his critique of Baumgarten and Wolff . . . . Wolff made the mistake of wanting to prove everything from a single formal principle, without considering that the principles are of a twofold nature; metaphysics also contains material principles."

leap is especially noticeable between these two points of the Wolffian demonstration: that which claims that "something that is, and of which it is possible to understand that it is," and that which claims that "there must always be a reason by which it is possible to understand why that thing can be made real."[25] The Wolffian concept of "ontology" already incorporates this deduction. For Wolff, ontology consists of an analysis of the fundamental and necessary principles of the being (cf. W, III, 2, §1; Sánchez-Rodríguez, 2023), but the reason for this being is explained in an equivocal or ambiguous way, since it is presented both as the reason for being in general and as the reason for being in one way or another; that is, as a cause. For Leibniz, this ontology already involves an extended and analytical conception of the functions of principles such as the PSR, and this is precisely that enables Leibniz to separate metaphysics in the strict sense from that governed by empty terms and chimeras (see note 21).

Crusius's critique represents a precedent and an inspiration for Kant, in whose philosophy the two functions of the principles will already appear clearly differentiated.[26] In his *New Elucidation* (1755), Kant will attempt to deal with the question of the justification of the PSR, not without acknowledging the accuracy of Crusius's objections to Wolff and making a distinction between the reason of truth and the reason of existence (cf. Perin, 2015). This distinction between *ratio essendi* and *ratio cognoscendi* underlies the one that will later appear in the *Inaugural Dissertation* (1770) between the logical and real uses of the intellect[27]:

> But in such sciences, whose first principles and axioms are given by sensible intuition, the use of the intellect is only logical, that is to say, such that by it alone we subordinate knowledge to one another. . . . But in pure philosophy, such as metaphysics, in which the use of the intellect concerning principles is real, that is, [in which] the primitive concepts of things and their relations and the axioms themselves are originally given by the pure intellect itself, and, not being intuitions, are not immune from error.
>
> (Ak, II, 410–411)

Precisely what Kant points out is the risk of confusing both uses of the understanding when we do philosophy. This confusion between the logical and real uses is represented by Wolff (among others), who pretends to deduce a principle concerning the existence of objects from another concerning the logical structure of the understanding. By doing this—says Kant—metaphysics does nothing more than "eternally turning over its Sisyphean stone" (Ak, II, 411). For Kant, the PNC is not an absolute principle, as Crusius noted, since it allows us to deduce only the impossible and the false, but not the true.[28] This idea comes out, for instance, in §2C

[25]Crusius also goes beyond and asserts that, if we want to use a principle such as the PNC to speak of existent objects, we must take into account other principles such as the principle of the *inseparable* and the principle of the *uncombinable* (cf. CPH, II, §1). Both principles have very similar formulations to the principles of continuity and identity of indiscernibles, which—according to Leibniz—can be deduced from the PSR. Regarding this topic, see Rodríguez-Pereyra (2014, pp. 15–37).

[26]For reasons of extension, I will not dwell on the broad development of the Kantian position. There are, however, several references to consult for further information regarding this issue (see Perin, 2015; Rivero, 2014; Sánchez-Rodríguez, 2023). It should also be noted that, although Kant effectively broke with certain assumptions of his precritical works, this break is not central to establishing Kant as an inheritor of the debate concerning the meaning of metaphysics. As we will see, the primary critique of the dogmatic presuppositions underlying Wolff's demonstration of the PSR is not only found in the *Critique of Pure Reason* but can be traced back to Kant's earlier writings.

[27]It is necessary to point out that in the *Inaugural Dissertation* the critical distinction between phenomena and noumena is already present, which allows us to identify the "real use" as a dogmatic use of understanding, insofar as it pretends to refer to real objects, lacking intuition and proceeding by means of concepts provided only by the pure intellect.

[28]In *Herder's Notes from Kant's Metaphysics Lectures* (1762–1764) we read: "thus, another principle must be found for what is truly true" (Ak, XXVIII, 8).

of the *Prolegomena* (1783), where Kant highlights the impossibility of proving synthetic propositions from the PNC:

> There are *a posteriori* synthetic judgments whose origin is empirical; but there are also certain *a priori* ones, which spring from the understanding and from pure reason. Both, however, agree in this: that they can never be derived solely from the principle of analysis, that is, from the law of contradiction; they require a quite different principle, although they must always be deduced from every principle, whatever it may be, in accordance with the law of contradiction, for nothing can be contrary to this principle, although not everything can be deduced from it.
>
> (Ak, IV, 267)

In the *Critique of Pure Reason* (1781), Kant will affirm that Leibniz also incurs in this confusion between the empirical and transcendental use of the concepts of the understanding. This is the subject of the Amphiboly of the Concepts of Reflection, a section of the Transcendental Analytics devoted precisely to confronting this error or confusion proper to the metaphysics that Kant will call dogmatic, for speaking of real objects where there is merely a discourse on concepts of the understanding. For Kant, "the condition of the objective use of our concepts of the understanding is only the species of our sensible intuition" (Kant [1781] 1998, A 286/B 342). As previously stated, the main opponent here is Leibniz:

> Lacking a transcendental topicality, and thus deceived by the amphiboly of the concepts of reflection, the famous Leibniz erected an *intellectual system of the world*, or rather, he thought he knew the inner constitution of things, by comparing all objects only with the understanding and with the formal abstract concepts of his thinking.[29]
>
> (Kant, [1781] 1998, A 270/B 326)

As a result of this critique of the dogmatism of Leibniz-Wolffian philosophy, the concept of "transcendental philosophy" appeared in Kant, as an alternative to the ontology of his predecessors. This concept is based on the distinction between the empirical and the transcendental use of the concepts and takes into consideration the fundamental role of sensibility in human knowledge. By making these precisions, ontology becomes critical (and not dogmatic), insofar as it detects the conditions of entities in general as properties of reason (not of objects) and does not confuse an epistemological foundation of intelligibility with a foundation of real existence. This is done by means of a specific and differentiated consideration about the scope of application of the various principles of rationality. As Sánchez-Rodríguez states, the concept of transcendental philosophy incorporates in Kant a modification or restriction regarding the study of the principles of human understanding (cf. Sánchez-Rodríguez, 2023, pp. 308–309).

We have been able to observe the dogmatic character of Wolff's ontology in the equivocal use of both senses or functions of the PSR in his attempt to demonstrate the principle. In doing so, Wolff overlooks the functional complexity of the PSR that is already present in Leibnizianism and constructs a kind of metaphysics that pretends to speak about objects in general from mere concepts of the understanding. From a historical point of view, it is very interesting that from 1786 onward, Kant is torn between the critique of dogmatic metaphysics represented by Leibniz-Wolffianism and the praise or attempt to appropriate a Leibniz who starts to appear "as a Kantian *in nuce* falsified by his followers" (Duque, 2011, p. xx). In 1790, Kant points out that both Eberhard and the Leibnizians have misinterpreted some of Leibniz's own formulations of the principles:

[29]Daniel Garber has pointed out that this critique consists in a "gross oversimplification of the real Leibniz" (Garber, 2008, p. 67).

> The *Critique of Pure Reason* can thus be regarded as Leibniz's true apologia, even in the face of his supporters, whose eulogies do him any honor; just as is the case with many other philosophers of the past, to whom many historians of philosophy, with all their pretended eulogies, attribute only mere nonsense. Such historians cannot understand the purpose of these philosophers because they neglect the key to the interpretation of all products of pure reason from mere concepts, the critique of reason itself (as the common source of all these concepts). Therefore, they are unable to recognize beyond what the philosophers actually said, what they really meant.
>
> (Ak, VIII, 251)

The opposition manifested in the *Critique of Pure Reason* gives way in the later Kant to an ambivalent position toward Leibniz. The functional complexity of the PSR helps to dispel the doubts concerning this supposed double attitude that Kant manifests when he interprets Leibniz. In this article it has been shown how the different functions of the PSR and its relation to other principles such as the PNC determine a complex position in Leibniz with respect to which Wolff's interpretation takes sides. By interpreting the PSR only from a causal perspective, the Wolffian demonstration introduces a dogmatic element that will later allow Crusius and Kant to express their opposition to it. Both this criticism and the specific ambivalence of the Kantian position throughout his works can be traced back to the richness of the formulations and functions of the PSR in Leibnizianism.

However, this is not to claim that we can find a critical Leibniz, as Eberhard claimed (cf. Kant, [1790] 1973, pp. 75–92), but to highlight Leibniz's transverse presence in the various stages of the evolution of the debate on the justification of the principles and the task of metaphysics. The considerations that have been put forward in this article also make it difficult to identify directly in this dispute between the positions of Leibniz and Wolff; if we wish to equate the two positions, it would be necessary first to specify in what sense both Leibnizian and Wolffian principles are being understood. The ontological dimension of the PSR present in Leibniz's philosophy will be incorporated by Kant's criticism, although no longer as a way of thinking the divine election (through the principle of the best) but as a way of thinking reason and its own demands (cf. Rescher, 2010, p. 113).[30,31]

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