

Tracing Reason's Arc: The Principle of Sufficient Reason from Leibniz to Kant

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Abstract:

Many commentators have suggested that, in the texts in which Kant discusses and restricts the principle of sufficient reason (PSR), he takes himself to be responding to Leibnizian arguments for the principle. In this paper, we will examine whether, and to what extent, Kant's objections are directed at Leibniz's actual arguments for the unrestricted version of the principle. We will argue that Kant's concerns, properly understood, are directed at arguments presented in Wolff's *Ontologia*, and later refined in Baumgarten's *Metaphysica*, rather than at an argument found in any of Leibniz's texts that were available in the eighteenth century. In particular, Leibniz's argument for the PSR on the basis of his conceptual containment theory of truth is not presented in the texts to which Kant (or Wolff, or Baumgarten) had access. Our aim is to shed light upon Kant's relationship to his predecessors within the German rationalist tradition, and also to show that Leibniz's eighteenth century successors did not appreciate what we today see as the full force of his rationalism.

The principle of sufficient reason is the claim that for each thing, there is some explanation for why or how this thing came to be.¹ Brandon Look, in a recent essay about the principle, writes that "it can be found in many of the canonical western thinkers extending all the way back to Parmenides. But it is in Leibniz's philosophy, of course, that the Principle of Sufficient Reason features so prominently and in Humean skepticism that it is thought to meet its downfall."² If Leibniz and Hume represent the most ardent advocate for, and opponent of, the principle of sufficient reason, we can see in Kant's treatment of the principle a synthesis of these two extremes. On the one hand, all possible experience is structured as the principle would have it.³

¹ The principle is endorsed in various guises by each of the early modern rationalists, including Descartes ("...something cannot arise from nothing," CSM II 28); Spinoza (at *Ethics* Ip11d) and Leibniz (in numerous texts, many of which are discussed in section 1 below). Contemporary defenders of the principle include Gordon Belot, "The Principle of Sufficient Reason"; Alexander Pruss, *The Principle of Sufficient Reason: A Reassessment*; and Michael Della Rocca, "PSR".

² Brandon Look, "Grounding the Principle of Sufficient Reason," 201.

³ Omri Boehm, in "Kant's Regulative Spinozism," appeals to this point to argue that Kant is committed to treating Spinoza's monism as a regulative ideal in our thinking about nature. This indicates how close Kant seems to remain to the rationalist tradition.

Yet, on the other hand, any attempts to prove that the principle applies beyond the bounds of possible experience are doomed to fail.⁴

Many commentators have suggested that, in the texts in which Kant discusses and restricts the principle of sufficient reason, he takes himself to be responding to Leibniz's arguments for the principle.⁵ In this paper, we will examine whether, and to what extent, Kant's objections are actually directed at Leibniz's arguments. We will argue that Kant's objection, properly understood, is directed at an argument first presented in Christian Wolff's *Ontologia*, and later refined in Alexander Baumgarten's *Metaphysica*. Part of the evidence for our claim is straightforward: Leibniz simply did not present an argument for the principle in any of his works that were available to Kant. In particular, Leibniz's argument for the principle on the basis of his conceptual containment theory of truth is not presented in the texts to which Kant (or Wolff, or Baumgarten) had access. Our aim is both to shed light upon Kant's relationship to his predecessors within the German rationalist tradition, and also to highlight some of the differences between Leibniz's (public) views and the views of those who came after him in the German rationalist tradition. Understanding the difference between the arguments for the principle advanced by Leibniz and those advanced by his successors is crucial for understanding the trajectory from Leibnizian rationalism to Kantian idealism.

The point bears on a recent interpretation of Kant developed by Desmond Hogan in his article, "The Metaphysical Motives of Kant's Analytic-Synthetic Distinction." Hogan argues that Kant's reasons for rejecting the unrestricted principle are not merely epistemological, but are closely connected to disagreements about the metaphysical conclusions he takes the principle to entail. To establish his thesis, Hogan appeals to passages in which Kant appears to attribute to

⁴ Ak. 4:271.

⁵ See, e.g., Allison, "Kant and the Two Dogmas of Rationalism," 51, and Hogan, "Metaphysical Motives of Kant's Analytic-Synthetic Distinction," 285-287.

Leibniz the view that the principle is an analytic principle. However, a closer look at the body of Leibniz's work that would have been available to Kant casts doubt upon this characterization of these passages. As we will see, Kant was not primarily concerned with the principle of sufficient reason *per se*, but only with the claim that the principle is analytic — that is, the claim that to deny that something has a sufficient reason is to assert a contradiction. Although Leibniz's fellow rationalists, Wolff and Baumgarten, both make this claim, Leibniz himself does not. Kant, we shall argue, was sensitive to this difference between Leibniz and his followers, and takes it to imply that Leibniz and his followers have very different conceptions of the principle.

In section 1, we will discuss the key texts in which Leibniz discusses the principle, focusing upon those texts that were available to Wolff, Baumgarten and Kant. We will argue that what we today recognize as Leibniz's strongest argument for the principle could not have influenced Kant's understanding of rationalist justifications for the principle. In section 2, we will outline the arguments for the unrestricted principle developed by Wolff and Baumgarten, with an eye to highlighting how these arguments render the principle analytic. In section 3, we will discuss the way in which Kant formulates the principle and his objection to the claim that the principle is an analytic truth. Finally, in the conclusion, we will briefly discuss some directions Wolff and Baumgarten could have taken to evade Kant's objections.

1. Leibnizian Motivations for the Principle of Sufficient Reason

In this section, we will outline the various motivations Leibniz offered for accepting the principle of sufficient reason. Kant's central objections to the principle presuppose that the principle in question is taken to be analytic; the aim of the section is to show that Leibniz never publicly attempted a demonstration of the principle that made it out to be an analytic truth. The reasons he

articulates in those of his works that were widely available in the eighteenth century are, as we will show, quite different from the arguments he examines in the personal notes and working documents that subsequent nineteenth- and twentieth-century scholarship has uncovered. Today we know that Leibniz privately entertained the view that the principle of sufficient reason might be derivable from, or even materially equivalent to, his theory of truth.⁶ If this is Leibniz's considered view, then his metaphysical rationalism amounts to the same thing as his epistemological rationalism: to say that every fact has a reason or explanation is to say that all truths are analytic, and vice versa.⁷ Our work in this section aims to highlight the fact that this illuminating perspective on Leibniz's system was simply not available to those who followed him in the eighteenth-century German rationalist tradition. As far as his immediate successors knew, Leibniz took the principle of sufficient reason to be a metaphysical axiom, a claim that we simply take to be true without demonstration. To make our case, we focus on those texts that were widely available in the period, and then examine the ways in which Leibniz argues (or fails to argue) for the principle of sufficient reason in those texts.

Although Leibniz was a notoriously prolific writer, several of the key doctrines that are today associated with Leibniz's thought were not clearly expressed in the texts that were available in the eighteenth century. It is true that Leibniz held, at various points in his intellectual career, that the principle of sufficient reason was materially equivalent to the conceptual containment theory of truth. According to this theory of truth, a proposition ascribing a given

⁶ Leibniz's theory of truth, sometimes called the predicate-in-subject principle, is most clearly asserted in "Primary Truths" (AG, 31) and "Discourse on Metaphysics" (AG, 46-7).

⁷ It is for this reason that commentators such as Couturat and Rescher have taken Leibniz to be committed to the claim that every true proposition is analytic. See Louis Couturat, *La Logique de Leibniz*, 215, and Nicholas Rescher, *The Philosophy of Leibniz*, 25. See also Gonzalo Rodriguez-Pereyra's helpful essay, "The Principles of Contradiction, Sufficient Reason, and Identity of Indiscernibles," for a more detailed discussion of the logical relationships between all of these claims.

predicate to a given subject is true if, and only if, the concept of the subject contains the concept of the predicate. So, for instance, in an early work, “Primary Truths,” Leibniz writes:

[T]he predicate or consequent is always in the subject or antecedent, and the nature of truth in general or the connection between the terms of a statement, consists in this very thing... (AG, 31)

He then argues that the principle of sufficient reason is entailed by this analysis of truth:

[T]he received axiom that *nothing is without reason*, or *there is no effect without a cause*, directly follows from these considerations; otherwise there would be a truth which could not be proved *a priori*, that is, a truth which could not be resolved into identities, contrary to the nature of truth, which is always an explicit or implicit identity. (ibid)⁸

Nor is this example isolated. In numerous papers, Leibniz either claims that the conceptual containment theory entails the principle of sufficient reason, or that the two are logically equivalent.⁹

Yet in most of Leibniz’s works — including the works that would have been available to Kant — he refrains from mentioning this tight connection between the principle of sufficient reason and the conceptual containment theory of truth. The list of Leibniz’s philosophical works that were widely distributed and available during the eighteenth century is surprisingly short, given how prolific we now know him to have been.¹⁰ Several of his shorter philosophical works were published during his lifetime:

- “Meditations on Knowledge, Truth and Ideas” (1684, in *Acta Eruditorum*)
- “New System of the Nature and Communication of Substances” (1695, in *Journal des Savants*)

⁸ Note that ‘*a priori*’ here refers to reasoning that proceeds from cause to effect, a usage popularized in the late Renaissance by Zabarella (e.g., in his *Opera Logica*, 691-2), and *not* to reasoning that is independent of experience.

⁹ An example of the claim that the conceptual containment theory and the principle of sufficient reason are logically equivalent occurs in an early fragment entitled “On Freedom and Possibility” (AG, 19).

¹⁰ We are drawing on the work of Catherine Wilson, “The Reception of Leibniz in the Eighteenth Century,” 442-3.

- “A Specimen of Dynamics” (1695, in *Acta Eruditorum*)

Some of his other short works remained unpublished but nonetheless appear to have been widely circulated both during his life and in the decades following his death:

- *Monadology* (1714)
- *Principles of Nature and Grace* (1714)

Finally, although Leibniz published few lengthy works of philosophy, the following book-length statements of his philosophical thought would have been available to Kant:

- *Theodicy* (1710)
- *Leibniz-Clarke Correspondence* (1717, edited and published by Clarke)
- *Recueil de diverses pieces, sur la Philosophie, la Religion, Naturelle, l’Histoire, les Mathematiques, &c* (1720, edited by des Maizeaux)
- *New Essays on Human Understanding* (1765)
- *Oeuvres philosophiques* (1765, edited by Raspé)
- *Opera Omnia* (1768, edited by Dutens)

Although many of these works do contain discussions of the principle of sufficient reason, none contain a clear argument for the principle, let alone an argument that would make the principle out to be analytic in the way Kant later finds objectionable.

In “Meditations on Knowledge,” “New System,” and “Specimen of Dynamics,” there is no discussion of the principle of sufficient reason at all. And in *Monadology* and *Principles of Nature and Grace*, the principle of sufficient reason is invoked without argument as an axiom required for generating the truths of metaphysics. So, in the *Principles*, Leibniz writes:

So far we have just spoken as simple *physicists*; now we must rise to *metaphysics*, by making use of the *great principle*, little used, commonly, that *nothing takes place without sufficient reason*, that is, that nothing happens without it being possible for someone who knows enough things to give a reason sufficient to determine why it is so and not otherwise. (GP VI, 602; AG, 209-210)

Likewise in the *Monadology*, he states:

Our reasonings are based on *two great principles, that of contradiction*, in virtue of which we judge that which involves a contradiction to be false, and that which is opposed or contradictory to the false to be true... And *that of sufficient reason*, by virtue of which we consider that we can find no true or existent fact, no true assertion, without there being a sufficient reason why it is thus and not otherwise, although most of the time these reasons cannot be known by us. (GP VI, 612; AG, 217)

In both cases, the principle is asserted and used without justification. The *Monadology*, however, was intended as an introduction to Leibniz's larger work, the *Theodicy*, and his statement of the principle of sufficient reason in the *Monadology* points the reader to sections 44 and 196 of *Theodicy*. And although Leibniz does not there offer an explicit argument for the principle, he does at least suggest a motivation for accepting it. In section 44, he writes:

This great principle holds for all events, and a contrary instance will never be supplied: and although more often than not we are insufficiently acquainted with these determinant reasons, we perceive nevertheless that there are such. Were it not for this great principle we could never prove the existence of God, and we should lose an infinitude of very just and very profitable arguments whereof it is the foundation; moreover, it suffers no exception, for otherwise its force would be weakened. (GP VI, 127; T, 147-148)

The thought is that if we reject the principle, we will also have to reject "an infinitude of very just and very profitable arguments," which is an unacceptable cost. The point might seem rather weak, but Leibniz reiterates it several times in his correspondence with Clarke as a way of defending his use of the principle. For example, in his fourth letter, he writes:

Those great principles of *sufficient reason* and *identity of indiscernibles* change the state of metaphysics. That science becomes real and demonstrative by means of these principles, whereas before it did generally consist in empty words. (GP VII, 372; LC, 22)

And in his fifth letter: “I dare say that without this great principle one cannot prove the existence of God nor account for many other important truths” (GP VII, 419; LC, 65).¹¹ Clearly, then, Leibniz found the theoretical fruitfulness of the principle very compelling. Accepting the principle of sufficient reason opens the door to a philosopher’s paradise, and that constitutes a very strong reason to accept it.

There is another motivation for the principle of sufficient reason that Leibniz appears to have found compelling throughout his philosophical career. In his fourth letter to Clarke, he writes:

[I]t is very strange to charge me with advancing my principle of the need for a sufficient reason without any proof drawn either from the nature of things or from the divine perfections. For...God’s perfection requires that all his actions should be agreeable to his wisdom and that it may not be said of him that he has acted without reason, or even that he has preferred a weaker reason before a stronger. (GP VII, 393; LC, 39)¹²

Leibniz is suggesting that the principle of sufficient reason can be seen as a consequence of God’s wisdom.¹³ Since God always acts for a reason, and God created the world and everything in it, it follows that everything (truth, fact, or event) must have a reason.¹⁴

¹¹ The same point is made in the *New Essays*, Book II, Ch. 21 (GP V, 164; NE, 179).

¹² We have elided part of Leibniz’s reply in which he asserts that “the nature of things requires that every event should have beforehand its proper conditions, requirements, and dispositions, the existence of which makes the sufficient reason of such an event.” It is hard to see this as an *argument* for the principle; it appears to be no more than a *description* of it.

¹³ Leibniz expresses the same point in numerous texts. For example, see *ST*, 104 & 112, and section 196 of *T*.

¹⁴ Though Leibniz shifts among different formulations of the principle in different works, at various times expressing it in terms of truths, facts, or events, in his correspondence with Clarke he plays it safe: “nothing happens without a reason why it should be so rather than otherwise” (*LC*, 7)

In spite of the fact that Leibniz presents these claims as motivations for accepting the principle, it is hard to see how they could constitute acceptable *arguments* for it. At least, they do not seem to be arguments of the sort that Leibniz ought to have accepted for one of his “two great principles.” For one thing, the claim regarding the principle’s theoretical fruitfulness undermines the claim about the principle’s following from God’s perfection: if Leibniz is right that we need the principle in order to prove that God exists, then it will be illegitimate to infer the principle from God’s existence. And, worse still, in the *New Essays*, Leibniz denies the possibility of demonstrating metaphysical principles using inductive arguments.¹⁵ Thus, although Leibniz offers these thoughts as motivations for accepting his principle of sufficient reason, they seem to be little more than rhetorical covering over Leibniz’s real view that the principle does not need proof.

This interpretation is backed up by an important interaction between Leibniz and Clarke late in their correspondence. Clarke objects that Leibniz has not yet provided an argument for the principle of sufficient reason, on which so many of Leibniz’s arguments rest. Leibniz’s reply is unexpected, given his many behind-the-scenes efforts to demonstrate the principle. He lists both of the (non-demonstrative) motivations already described, but only after making a show of how unreasonable it is to ask for a proof of this principle:

[Clarke] claimed that I have been guilty of a petition of principle. But of what principle, I beseech you? Would to God less clear principles had never been laid down. The principle

¹⁵ Leibniz’s reasoning on this point is presented in a fairly lengthy discussion of mathematical and metaphysical “*Maximes*” at *New Essays* Bk. IV, Ch. 12. There, Leibniz has Theophilus argue that if we take the axioms of geometry to be grounded in particular examples revealed by the senses, “we would be deprived of what I value most in geometry, considered as a contemplative study, namely its letting us glimpse the true source of eternal truths and of the way in which we can grasp their necessity” (GP V 432-3; NE 452). Leibniz thus seems to be committed to the claim that a metaphysical principle cannot be grounded in its many instances without depriving it of its explanatory and justificatory power. Yet this rules out the possibility of establishing the principle of sufficient reason on the basis of the fact that it has been used in “an infinitude of very just and very profitable arguments.” Or, if this *were* the best we could do, it would follow that we would be unable to understand *why* the principle is true.

in question is the principle of the need for a sufficient reason for anything to exist, for any event to happen, for any truth to take place. Is this a principle that needs to be proved?

(LC, 65)

The question is rhetorical; the answer is “no.” Given that neither of the previous two motivations can do the job, as Leibniz was likely to have recognized, we should take this as Leibniz’s considered position on the matter.

There is one intriguing passage in Leibniz’s published work that commentators have taken to contradict the account presented here, for it has been taken to express the view that the principle of sufficient reason can be derived as an analytic truth. The passage occurs late in the *Theodicy*, in a section titled “Observations on the Book Concerning ‘The Origin of Evil’ Published Recently in London.” (Leibniz’s target was *De Origine Mali*, first published in 1704 by William King, the Archbishop of Dublin.) There, Leibniz writes that the principle of sufficient reason, along with the principle of contradiction, “must hold not only in necessary but also in contingent truths... For one may say in a sense that these two principles are contained in the definition of the true and the false” (*T*, 419). Although Leibniz swiftly moves on to other matters without developing this claim in any detail, many commentators have seen this as an adumbration of Leibniz’s earlier arguments for the principle of sufficient reason in earlier, unpublished works. For example, Rodriguez-Pereyra writes, “What might this mean? ...[In] *Primary Truths* Leibniz argues that the Principle of Sufficient Reason follows from [the predicate-in-subject principle]... So this is the sense in which the Principle of Contradiction and the Principle of Sufficient Reason are contained in the definition of the true.”¹⁶ On the basis of similar reasoning, Hogan takes the *Theodicy* passage as evidence that Kant and his

¹⁶ Rodriguez-Pereyra, “The Principles of Contradiction”.

contemporaries were “quite familiar with Leibniz’s thesis that all truth is in principle accessible through conceptual analysis” (Hogan 2013, 272).

It may be that this brief passage from *Theodicy* is best understood in terms of Leibniz’s earlier, unpublished attempts to prove the principle of sufficient reason using more fundamental principles. However, this would hardly have been the most natural interpretation for eighteenth century readers, who were unable to comb through Leibniz’s vast collection of unpublished works. Our shared scholarly understanding of Leibniz today is the result of long work on the translation and interpretation of writings to which Kant and his contemporaries did not have access. It is only from this perspective that we could read Leibniz’s claim that the principle of sufficient reason is “contained in the definition of the true and the false” — a claim he does not expand upon or return to — and infer that Leibniz holds all truths to be “in principle accessible through conceptual analysis.” *Pace* Hogan, this would not be a clear inference at all if we lacked access to other texts by the same author defending this surprising claim. Indeed, Leibniz appears to have been extremely cautious in revealing his commitment to this view. As we have already seen, his most salient reply to Clarke’s demand for an argument for the principle of sufficient reason was to reject the demand, even though he must have known this would hardly satisfy Clarke. Had Leibniz been willing openly to embrace the analyticity of all truths, or the conceptual containment theory of truth, it would have been trivial for him to provide an argument for the principle of sufficient reason (as he did in “Primary Truths” and other unpublished manuscripts). Even on the assumption that these were his considered views, he was for whatever reason unwilling to be open about them when they could have been most useful to him.

Leibniz, we have now seen, did not publish any arguments for his principle of sufficient reason, let alone any arguments that would render the principle an analytic truth. Leibniz's most prominent successors in the early modern rationalist tradition, Christian Wolff and Alexander Baumgarten, saw this as a flaw in his system. Both Wolff and, slightly later, Baumgarten provided arguments for the principle of sufficient reason on the basis of the principle of contradiction alone — arguments that, if successful, would entail the analyticity of sufficient reason. In other words, according to both Wolff and Baumgarten, to deny of some thing that it has a sufficient reason is to assert a contradiction. As we shall argue, however, Kant does not object to the principle of sufficient reason *per se*, but to the claim that it is an analytic truth. The natural conclusion is that it was not Leibniz, but Wolff and Baumgarten that Kant had in mind when he denied that the principle was analytic.

2. The Principle of Sufficient Reason as Analytic Truth

In this section, we will outline the arguments that Wolff and Baumgarten provide for the principle of sufficient reason, emphasizing the contradiction they purport to find in denials of sufficient reason. Each argument is fallacious or invalid (or both), so contemporary proponents of sufficient reason are not likely to come away from this section with any additional ammunition for their cause. The aim of the section is rather an historical one. Wolff and Baumgarten did not see themselves as rehearsing Leibniz's reasons for endorsing the principle, but as providing new and more secure arguments for it. And in our view, it is first and foremost *these* arguments at which Kant takes aim in his various criticisms of "Leibnizian" attempts to demonstrate the principle.

In his *Ontologia*, published in 1730, Christian Wolff endorses the principle of sufficient reason in much the same form that the principle took in Leibniz's writings. The argument he offers, however, has quite a different basis from anything Leibniz was known to have made at the time. Nor does it seem that Wolff developed the argument on the basis of his long-lasting correspondence with Leibniz.¹⁷ In spite of the fact that Wolff arrives at a conclusion that it seems Leibniz had privately entertained decades earlier, Wolff's argument is quite different even from the arguments Leibniz considered in his unpublished manuscripts.

Wolff begins by defining 'sufficient reason' as that "from which it may be understood [*intelligitur*] why something is" (*WO* §56), where the range of 'something' [*aliquid*] is left unspecified.¹⁸ He then defines 'nothing' as "that which corresponds to no notion [*notio*]" (*WO* §57). Based on this definition, he concludes, "nothing cannot produce, or effect, something," for "there is a contradiction between the claim that nothing has no notion & nevertheless, despite this, is able to cause something" (*WO* §68).¹⁹ Wolff's reasoning then unfolds in two further stages. First, he outlines the absurdity that he finds in the thought that something could exist with no explanation. In such a case, he reasons, "it will be admitted that nothing either becomes or produces something" (§69). But, he continues, given the principle established at §68, it is absurd

¹⁷ Gerhardt published the correspondence in 1860 as *Briefwechsel zwischen Leibniz und Christian Wolff*; he did not include the letters in his edition of Leibniz's philosophical writings, which is appropriate given how sparse the philosophical content of the correspondence turns out to be. That said, the most philosophical of their exchanges, regarding the nature perfection and free will, took place during 1705, late in Leibniz's career and early in Wolff's. It seems Wolff's views on these matters softened somewhat during the years between 1705 and 1730, when he published the *Ontologia*.

¹⁸ The example Wolff uses to illustrate the idea of a sufficient reason is a geometrical one: the sufficient reason for a triangle's having three angles is its being bounded by three lines. So at the very least, *facts* can be the object of reasons, on Wolff's view. Note that Wolff is here following the formulation of the principle provided by Leibniz in his correspondence with Clarke (LC, 7).

¹⁹ Some early modern philosophers would have been content to stop here, on the assumption that this variation on the Scholastic *ex nihilo nihil fit* is just the principle of sufficient reason in a different guise; Wolff does not take his work to be done, however. Wolff also introduces and makes use of a metaphysical variation on the identity property of addition: "If nothing is given, as many times as one pleases, that is still nothing, not something" (*WO* §61). Wolff was a professional mathematician for most of his life, so it is not surprising to see him work through metaphysical matters using mathematics as his guide. This principle, in addition to *ex nihilo nihil fit*, he takes to play a role in his argument for the principle of sufficient reason.

to think that nothing could produce something. Finally, with this established, the argument for the principle of sufficient reason can be quite brief:

Nothing is without sufficient reason [ratione sufficiente] why it is, rather than is not, that is, if something is given, something is also given through which it may be understood why that thing is, rather than is not. For either nothing is without sufficient reason why it is, rather than is not; or something is able to be without sufficient reason why it is, rather than is not (§53). Suppose A to be without sufficient reason why it is, rather than is not. Therefore nothing is given through which it may be understood why A exists (§56). So it is admitted that A exists because nothing is assumed to exist: since that is absurd (§69), nothing is without sufficient reason, or, if anything is given, it is also admitted that there is something through which it may be understood why it is. (WO §70)

Any potential counterexample to the principle would have no reason for its existence, yet it would exist. So it could only have come from nothing, which is impossible. Hence there can be nothing without sufficient reason.

If Wolff's argument succeeds, it will follow that the principle of sufficient reason is analytic, for any truth that follows from the principle of contradiction and definitions alone must be analytic. The impossibility Wolff ascribes to counterexamples to the principle of sufficient reason is not just metaphysical, but conceptual. It is part of the very logic of existence that any existing thing must have a reason that explains its existence; the possibility that something might exist without reason would violate the laws of logic. Now, this does not in itself mean that the reason *x* exists may be deduced via analysis from the concept of *x* combined with the claim that *x* exists — that is, it does not entail anything like the young Leibniz's account of "complete concepts." However, it does entail a consequence inhospitable to Kant, namely that *everything*

— and not merely the objects of possible experience — falls within the scope of rational explanation.

Others followed in Wolff's footsteps. Alexander Baumgarten attempts a very similar argument for the principle in his *Metaphysica* of 1739.²⁰ Like Wolff, Baumgarten argues that there is a contradiction in the claim that the reason for the existence of something could be nothing. He first defines a reason as “that from which it is knowable [*cogniscibile*] why something is” (§14). His argument then runs as follows:

[T]he reason [*ratio*] for each possible thing is either nothing or something (§10). If nothing were the reason for some possible thing, it would be knowable from nothing why that thing is (§14), and hence the nothing itself would be representable [*repraesentabile*] and something (§8), and nothing would be something. (*BM* §20, translation modified)²¹

In this presentation of the argument, Baumgarten makes clear the fact that it turns on a substantive conception of ‘nothing’. The crucial move in the argument is the inference from the claim that if something were “knowable from nothing,” then “nothing itself would be representable and [therefore] something.” This move relies entirely upon Baumgarten’s striking characterization of ‘nothing’ as “something that cannot be represented” (§7). It follows straightforwardly from this definition that nothing is something, hence substantive. Again, if Baumgarten’s argument succeeds, it will follow that the principle of sufficient reason is analytic: to deny that something has a reason will be to assert that its existence is explained by nothing, which entails a contradiction.

²⁰ But note that the translation we typically follow, by Fugate and Hymers, is based primarily upon the fourth edition of Baumgarten’s *Metaphysica*, published in 1757.

²¹ Fugate and Hymers render ‘ratio’ as “ground,” so that (for instance) Baumgarten’s ‘*principium rationis sufficientis*’ is translated as “principle of sufficient ground” (*BM* §22). Throughout, we advert to translating ‘ratio’ as “reason” in order to highlight continuity with Leibniz’s writings.

Kant had strong objections to the Wolff/Baumgarten approach to demonstrating the principle of sufficient reason, both in his pre-critical and critical writings. One objection, which Kant developed in his (pre-critical) lectures on metaphysics, is that the argument is not even valid, for it equivocates on the term ‘nothing’. The invalid move comes when Wolff reasons in the following manner:

(1) Nothing is the sufficient reason for (let’s say) this chair.

(2) So, this chair exists because of nothing.

This move seems innocuous, but in fact the sense of the term ‘nothing’ in premise (1) differs from that operating in premise (2). Given Wolff’s notion of sufficient reason, premise (1) amounts to the claim that it is not the case that something explains the chair’s existence; the term ‘nothing’ here denotes logical negation. But in (2), the term takes on a substantive meaning; it (‘nothing’) is supposed to explain the existence of the chair. Here, ‘nothing’ is playing the logical role of an individual, and is taken as *explanans* with respect to the chair’s existence. *This* is the conclusion that Wolff and Baumgarten take to be absurd — it is, after all, inconceivable that nothingness could produce something. But this conclusion manifestly does not follow from the given premise, even taking Wolff’s and Baumgarten’s definitions into account. Kant writes, “One can easily refute this proof if one parodies it... e.g., you have money in the chest — for if you did not have that, then there would be nothing of money in the chest, then nothing would be money, thus you must have money” (Ak 29: 815-6).

Baumgarten avoids this particular objection by straightforwardly using a substantive conception of nothingness throughout his presentation of the argument. Yet it is in the definitions of the key concepts in Wolff’s and Baumgarten’s arguments that we find what Kant would, in his critical period, come to find most philosophically objectionable. For example, Baumgarten’s

definition of ‘nothing’ includes so many clauses besides the relevant one that it is hard to see why someone who is not already committed to the principle of sufficient reason would accept it as legitimate:

Nothing—which is negative..., something that cannot be represented, something impossible, something inconsistent (an absurdity cf. §13), something involving or implying a contradiction, something contradictory—*is both A and not-A*. (BM §7)

For a metaphysical rationalist who holds that the structure of reality and the structure of reason are one, this definition of nothingness might seem plausible. After all, on the rationalist’s view, what is impossible and what is inconceivable come to the same thing. However, if someone desires proof of the principle of sufficient reason in order to be *shown* that the structure of reality and the structure of reason are one, this definition will seem wildly question begging. The problem lies in the way that the definition confuses epistemological and metaphysical claims: it is one thing to say that something cannot be *represented*, and another to say that it cannot *be*. As we’ll see in the next section, Kant thinks that any attempt to prove the principle of sufficient reason on the basis of analytic principles is going to have to involve a confusion of this sort.

3. Kant on the Principle of Sufficient Reason

As the discussions of Leibniz, Wolff, and Baumgarten show, the three thinkers did not present the same arguments for the principle of sufficient reason. If we take account only of the Leibnizian writings available to Kant, the division becomes even clearer. Wolff and Baumgarten each attempt a deductive argument to justify the principle of sufficient reason as a necessary truth following from the principle of contradiction. Leibniz, on the other hand, in lieu of an argument, offers only brief rationalizations of the principle appealing to its usefulness. Leibniz’s

lack of deductive argument and appeal to effectiveness even led Arthur Lovejoy to conclude that Leibniz thought that the principle could *only* be established *a posteriori*.²² As we will argue in the following section, this position on Leibniz is closer to the one held by Kant than the view widely expressed in the literature.

In both recent and older scholarship we frequently see Kant's position on the principle of sufficient reason and related topics construed as a direct response to Leibniz.²³ Some discussions pit Kant against Leibniz by having him reject Leibniz's deductive principle of sufficient reason without reference to Wolff and Baumgarten at all. Other thinkers include Wolff as an influence on Kant's view of the principle while assuming that Wolff and Leibniz held identical positions.²⁴ Frequently commentators suggest that Kant would have viewed Wolff's position as identical to Leibniz's, but make their case by appealing to Leibnizian texts Kant could not have read.²⁵

In a recent essay Desmond Hogan presents yet another account which seems to conflate the positions of Leibniz and Wolff.²⁶ Hogan centers his argument for Kant's rejection of the analytic principle of sufficient reason around a passage from a late essay entitled *What Real Progress has Metaphysics Made in Germany Since the Time of Leibniz and Wolff?* (*Progress*).

²² Arthur Lovejoy, "On Kant's Reply to Hume," 388-389.

²³ There has been substantial attention devoted to the way in which Kant's discussion of the principle is a response to Hume. This topic was carefully covered by Béatrice Longuenesse in "Kant's Deconstruction of the Principle of Sufficient Reason." Further comment on Hume is outside the scope of the present paper.

²⁴ Michael Friedman, for example, presents Leibniz and Wolff as differing only with respect to their views of the usefulness of mathematics, and references the "Leibnizian-Wolffian" philosophy throughout *Kant and the Exact Sciences*.

²⁵ See, for example, Allison "Kant and the Two Dogmas of Rationalism." Allison ascribes to Leibniz the "famous" rationalist dogma that "the notion of the predicate is somehow contained in the notion of the subject" on the basis of a short, unedited work that was first published in 1857 in a collection edited by Foucher de Careil ("Kant and the Two Dogmas," 50). If this claim is famous, it is famous to *us*, not to eighteenth century authors like Wolff and Kant. For more examples of this sort of confusion, see Cicovacki, "Kant's Debt to Leibniz"; and Hanna, *Kant and the Foundations of Analytic Philosophy*, 206. It should also be noted that there are some key exceptions to the general confusion expressed in the literature on the historical relationships of Leibniz, Wolff, and Kant. See, for example, Jauernig, "Kant's Critique of the Leibnizian Philosophy: *Contra* the Leibnizians but *Pro* Leibniz"; Schönfeld, *The Philosophy of the Young Kant: The Precritical Project*; and Kuehn, "Reason and Understanding." Sadly, none of these works devote much attention to Kant's mature formulation of the principle of sufficient reason.

²⁶ Hogan, "Metaphysical Motives."

His principle of sufficient reason, since he did not feel obligated to found it on any intuition *a priori*, but traced the idea of it to more *a priori* concepts, produced the consequence that all things, metaphysically considered, would be compounded of reality and negation, of being and nonbeing...and the ground of a negation can only be that there is no reason why something should be posited, i.e. no reality present; and thus out of all so-called metaphysical evil, in combination with good of that kind, he created a world of mere light and shadows...According to him, pain would be grounded merely on lack of pleasure, vice merely on the want of virtuous motives, and the rest of a moving body merely on the absence of moving forces, since by mere concepts reality = a can be contrasted, not to reality = b, but only to privation = 0 – there being no consideration of the fact that in intuition, e.g., of the outer, *a priori*, namely in space, an opposition of the real (the moving force) to another real, namely a moving force in the opposite direction, can be combined in one subject...But for this purpose he would assuredly have had to assume mutually opposing directions, which can be represented only in intuition and not in mere concepts; and thence arose the principle, at variance both with common sense and even with morality, that all evil as ground = 0. (Ak. 20:282-283)

As Hogan reads the passage, Kant is arguing that Leibniz's analytic conception of the principle of sufficient reason entailed his conceptual containment theory of truth, and that the conceptual containment theory in turn entails a privative metaphysics. This privative metaphysics then requires that all real opposition, such as the opposing forces present in two colliding bodies, must be impossible. Since, Kant claims, real opposition *is* possible, any privative metaphysics of this sort must be false; so the conceptual containment theory of truth must be false; so, finally, the

principle of sufficient reason must also be false — or, at least, the analytic version of the principle to which Leibniz supposedly subscribes. Hogan views this argument as a *reductio ad absurdum* of Leibniz's analytic principle of sufficient reason, resulting from its intuitively false metaphysical implications.

While Hogan makes a compelling case for the importance of the distinction between analytic and synthetic judgments in understanding Kant's rejection of a version of the principle, he mistakenly conflates the views of Wolff and Leibniz on this matter. Hogan reads *Progress* as offering a critique of Leibniz's conceptual containment theory, but, as we have discussed earlier, Kant did not have access to the writings in which Leibniz clearly formulates this theory. Moreover, there is some evidence to suggest that Kant is not responding here to Leibniz at all, but rather to Wolff. The passage in question uses only the singular pronoun "he" without making explicit reference to a particular author. As the preceding discussion in *Progress* considers both Leibniz and Wolff it is not clear which "he" the pronoun is intended to reference. As we will discuss in more detail later, there are multiple places where Kant expresses his dissatisfaction with Wolff and his followers as interpreters of Leibniz.²⁷ If Wolff is the target of Kant's critique in the passage from *Progress*, then Leibniz's conceptual containment theory is especially irrelevant to Kant's concerns in that passage: not only did Kant not know about the theory, but it does not seem that Wolff held such a theory.²⁸

²⁷ We are focusing on texts in which Kant takes Wolff and the other "Leibnizians" to be misunderstanding Leibniz, and advancing a position that (Kant thinks) Leibniz himself did not hold. However, Kant did not always think Wolff a poor interpreter of Leibniz. Sometimes he does take Wolff to be rendering explicit a view that was only implicit in Leibniz's work. For example, in the *Critique of Pure Reason*, Kant writes, "Although Herr von Leibniz did not exactly announce [his denial of real opposition] with the pomp of a new principle, he nevertheless used it for new assertions, and his successors expressly incorporated it into their Leibnizian/Wolffian doctrine" (A273/B329).

²⁸ Wolff seems to have accepted the real influence of one substance upon another, so he must reject the view that every state of a substance is fully grounded in that substance, and so likewise would reject Leibniz's conceptual containment theory of truth — if he had known about it, that is. Wolff's realism about substantial interaction is on display throughout *WO* Part II, Section II, Chapter II; e.g., he writes, "If [substance] A suffers from B itself, B acts on A. For since nothing is without sufficient reason why it is, rather than is not; if A suffers from B itself, the

When Kant first introduces the principle of sufficient reason in the *Critique of Pure Reason*, it is not in the beginning as a metaphysical first principle, but one of a set of principles that explains the necessary conditions for our experience of the world insofar as our experience is temporally determined. The second of the three “analogies of experience” reads:

This rule for determining something with respect to its temporal sequence, however, is that in what precedes, the condition is to be encountered under which the occurrence always (i.e. necessarily) follows. Thus the principle of sufficient reason is the ground of possible experience, namely the objective cognition of appearances with regard to their relation in the successive series of time.²⁹

On the one hand, Kant is far from abandoning the principle. He calls it “the ground of possible experience,” and provides a formulation that is a close approximation of his pre-critical “principle of determining ground” from the *New Elucidations*³⁰. On the other hand, the context of the mention and the way in which the principle is formulated makes it clear that Kant is rejecting Wolffian versions of the principle as unsuitably broad in scope. There seem to be two ways in which Kant’s formulation of the principle can be read. On a minimal reading we can interpret Kant as saying merely that if we perceive something as a cause then we must necessarily perceive it as being temporally prior to its effects. A more robust reading of the principle would say something closer to “All occurrences in experience are *necessarily* preceded by their causes.” Even if we grant that Kant intends the more robust formulation, Kant endorses the principle only in application to experience. The result is a version of the principle

sufficient reason for the passion will be in B” (§775, our translation). In his *Early German Philosophy* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1969), Lewis White Beck observes that in Wolff’s system, “The pre-established harmony of Leibniz’ philosophy gives way to a corpuscular philosophy in which physical substances truly exist in space and interact with each other” (271).

²⁹ A200-201/B245-246.

³⁰ See Ak. 1:391-410. A thoroughgoing historical treatment of Kant’s position on the principle of sufficient reason would, of course, require a substantial discussion of his pre-critical views. Such a task is, sadly, outside the scope of the present discussion.

substantially more limited in scope than that proposed by Wolff as well as Baumgarten: the Wolff/Baumgarten version of the principle would apply even to entities such as God and the soul, while Kant's does not.

Kant does not provide a clear explanation of why he prefers only this more limited, non-analytic formulation of the principle until much later in the *Critique*. Kant devotes the ending "Doctrine of Method" section to considering the kinds of judgments we can and cannot make with respect to metaphysics. He discusses the principle at length in a section devoted to the possibility of proofs in metaphysics. Here he says:

The illusion of conviction, which rests on subjective causes of association and is taken for the insight of a natural affinity, cannot balance the misgiving to which steps risked in this way properly give rise. Hence all attempts to prove the principle of sufficient reason have also, according to the general consensus of experts, been in vain, and, since one still could not abandon this principle, until the transcendental critique came onto the scene one preferred obstinately to appeal to healthy human understanding (a refuge, which always proves that the cause of reason is in despair) rather than to attempt new dogmatic proofs. But if the proposition of which a proof is to be given is an assertion of pure reason, and if I would even go beyond my concepts of experience by means of other ideas, then all the more must this proof contain the justification of such a step of synthesis (if it would otherwise be possible) as a necessary condition of its probative force.³¹

Though the principle stands as the ground for possible experience (with regard to its temporal determination) it cannot be a metaphysical first principle. When we make the principle a first principle we do so because we are caught between being unwilling to entirely abandon the

³¹ A783/B811

principle because of its utility, but also recognizing that all arguments so far presented for it are invalid. Rather than leaving the principle behind, perhaps we might declare it self-evident and thus need only to appeal to “healthy human understanding” as proof of its truth — but this, Kant thinks, would be just as fruitless as attempting to provide a proof. Kant thus sees three possible options, two of which are hopeless: abandon the principle (with devastating consequences for science), declare the principle self-evident (an admission of the impossibility of a strict deductive proof), or accept the transcendental argument he provides for the restricted, non-analytic version of the principle which speaks only of the conditions under which experience is possible.³²

The impossibility of providing a demonstration for the principle of sufficient reason is, as Kant points out in the above passage, due to the principle’s synthetic nature. As Kant defines them in the *First Critique*, synthetic judgments, “go beyond the given concept in order to consider something entirely different from what is thought in it as in a relation to it, a relation which is therefore never one of either identity or contradiction, and one where neither the truth nor the error of the judgment can be seen in the judgment itself.”³³ The move Kant makes in this argument is similar to the one which Wolff and Baumgarten make in attempting to prove the principle. Wolff and Baumgarten ask the reader to provide a counterexample to the principle by pointing to something which lacks a reason. Since no counterexample can be found, the principle must be true. Kant asks the reader to point him towards a proof for the principle, knowing that, since the principle is synthetic, no such proof can be provided.

³² Kant provides a similar discussion in a long footnote found in the preface to the *Metaphysical Foundations of Natural Science*. Here he emphasizes that the connection between cause and effect is only subjectively necessary while no proof for the objective necessity can be found. Ak. 4:476.

³³ A154/B155.

Kant claims that the supreme principle of all synthetic judgments is the possibility of experience.³⁴ Unless a proof limits the application of any synthetic claim to possible experience, the proof must be invalid. The principle of sufficient reason must be synthetic as it moves beyond mere identity. After all, the reason for the existence of a thing is its cause, and a merely analytic principle could never connect a cause to its effect. For Kant it is clear, first, that the principle of sufficient reason must be synthetic, and second, that as a synthetic principle, the principle cannot be proven without limiting its use to possible experience.

These are Kant's objections to the Wolffian conception of the principle of sufficient reason. Did Kant think they were objections that applied to Leibniz's conception of that principle as well? There are several reasons to think the answer is *no*. In a later essay, *On a Discovery Whereby Any New Critique of Pure Reason is to be Made Superfluous by an Older One*, (*Discovery*) published in the same year as the *Critique of the Power of Judgment*, Kant provides a response to attacks from one of his most determined critics, Johann August Eberhard. Eberhard was a dedicated and enthusiastic Leibnizian who repeatedly argued that whatever was correct in Kant was mere repetition of Leibniz and all that was innovative was clearly false.³⁵ In responding to Eberhard's criticisms Kant points to Eberhard's confused construal of analytic and synthetic judgments. Eberhard claims that analytic judgments are those that only consider the essence of an object, while judgments which take into account the attributes of an object are synthetic.³⁶ Kant claims that Eberhard uses this distinction in order to claim that the principle of sufficient reason is an analytic one without alerting the reader to the fact that such a version of

³⁴ A156/195.

³⁵ For a charitable reading of Eberhard's attacks on Kant see Lovejoy "Kant's Antithesis of Dogmatism and Criticism." For a thoroughgoing refutation of Lovejoy's position see Beck "Lovejoy as a Critic of Kant." Unsurprisingly, in "On Kant's Reply to Hume" Lovejoy is explicit about his view that Leibniz's principle of sufficient reason differs from that of Wolff, while perhaps overstating Leibniz' commitment to the impossibility of an apodictic proof for the principle (388-389). For additional commentary on Eberhard as well as translations of relevant Kantian writings see Allison *The Kant-Eberhard Controversy*.

³⁶ Ak. 8:193.

the principle would only allow one to connect objects with their attributes without providing for causal connections.³⁷

Kant spends much of *Discovery* patiently explaining the various ways in which he believes Eberhard has misread not only his own writings but those of Leibniz as well. Of particular relevance is the degree to which Kant thought that Eberhard (and others) misinterpreted Leibniz's view of the principle of sufficient reason.

Is it really credible that Leibniz wished to have his principle of sufficient reason construed objectively (as a natural law), when he attributed great importance to it an addition to previous philosophy? It is, of course, so generally acknowledged and (within suitable limits) so manifestly clear, that not even the weakest mind can believe itself to have made therein a new discovery; and it has also been greeted with much ridicule by opponents who have misunderstood it. But this principle was for him a merely subjective one, having reference only to a critique of pure reason. For what does it mean to say that there must be other principles besides the principle of contradiction? It is to say in effect, that by the principle of contradiction can be known only what already lies in the concept of the object; if something more is to be said of it [the object], then something else must be added beyond this concept, and to show how this is possible we have to look for a special principle, distinct from that of contradiction, i.e., it will have to have its special ground. Since the latter kind of propositions are (now at least) called synthetic, Leibniz wanted to say only that beyond the principle of contradiction (as the principle of analytic

³⁷ Ak. 8:230-231.

judgments), still another principle, namely that of synthetic judgments, must be added.³⁸

Kant points out that the expansion of the principle that Eberhard and others attribute to Leibniz would have put Leibniz's conception of the principle at odds with the conception of other thinkers. If Leibniz viewed his principle as substantially different from the one proposed by earlier thinkers it is likely that he would have viewed the principle as a historically important one. However, Kant argues, Leibniz does not discuss the principle as though it is a new discovery on his part, a clear indication that Leibniz thought he was incorporating a principle forwarded by others rather than adopting an altered principle of his own invention. The principle argued for by Eberhard and others is an alteration on the historical principle and thus cannot be the principle that Leibniz himself endorsed.

Whether or not Kant correctly understood Leibniz's conception of the principle of sufficient reason, *Discovery* shows that Kant viewed Leibniz's conception of the principle as compatible with his own. On Kant's view, even though Leibniz did not explicitly call the principle of sufficient reason synthetic, he still recognized the need for a principle guiding synthetic judgments that went beyond the merely analytic principle of contradiction. Without a synthetic principle it is not possible to connect a cause with its effect. The stronger view of the principle of sufficient reason as an "objective natural law" was not originated by Leibniz, but mistakenly adopted by his followers.³⁹

³⁸ Ak. 8:248. It is worth noting that Allison reads the ending portion of *Discovery* as a polemic "ironical" in tone. See, in particular *The Kant-Eberhard Controversy*, pp. 46, 101-102. Allison provides little justification for this view beyond saying that, "Kant interprets these doctrines in a manner which does obvious violence not only to the Leibnizian texts but also to his other presentations and analyses of Leibnizian doctrines" (102). Even if one is willing to grant that this statement alone constitutes a persuasive argument for thinking that Kant is not presenting his sincere position, it does seem clear that Kant distinguishes between the version of the principle put forward by Leibniz and that endorsed by followers such as Wolff and Eberhard.

³⁹ Herman J. de Vleeschauwer adopts a similar view of the evolution of the principle giving some credence to the picture Kant presents. On Vleeschauwer's account Leibniz elevated the principle to a place of prominence in

Considered in the broader context of Kant's other writings, one can see an alternate interpretation of the passage from *Progress* that Hogan employs to justify his reading of Kant's motivations for rejecting the principle of sufficient reason. Kant ends the discussion of Leibniz and the principle in *Progress* by saying, "Thus his principle of sufficient reason, since he located it in mere concepts, was also not of the slightest help to him in getting beyond the principle of analytic judgments, the law of contradiction, and extending himself in synthetic *a priori* fashion by reason."⁴⁰ Kant here repeats the reason he gives time and again for rejecting the Wolffian conception of the principle: a merely conceptual principle not grounded in intuition can only be analytic.⁴¹ In order for the principle to be synthetic (and thus useful) it must be limited in application to possible experience, allowing it to demonstrate cause and effect connections. The discussion of privative metaphysics is important for establishing that though Leibniz and/or Wolff mistakenly thought that a merely analytic principle was acceptable they did so because they had adopted a merely analytic metaphysics. Privative metaphysics can only discuss whether a thing is or is not ("moving" or "not moving") it cannot expand our ideas or synthesize notions or subsume them under categories. In adopting this kind of metaphysics Leibniz and Wolff are led into the further mistake of thinking a merely conceptual (and thus analytic) principle is acceptable. Kant here asserts both that they are wrong about the metaphysics and, more importantly, that they are wrong about the principle.

In spite of the various interpretive difficulties posed by these two later Kantian essays, it is clear from them that Kant held a nuanced view of the relationship between Wolff and Leibniz.

philosophical reasoning it had not previously occupied, but it was Wolff who first presented the principle as absolutely universal. See the first chapter of de Vleeschauwer, *L'Évolution de la pensée Kantienne*. For an alternate account suggesting that Wolff's attempt to derive the principle from the principle of contradiction constitutes a *demotion* of the principle's importance see Ewing *Kant's Treatment of Causality*, pp. 20-21.

⁴⁰ Ak. 20:283.

⁴¹ See, for example, Ak. 4:270-271, Ak. 29:806, Ak. 29:788, among others.

With respect to some issues he is happy to equate the two as holding the same position. These are places where one might assume that Kant agrees with the interpretation of Leibniz advanced by Wolff with respect to the issue at hand. On the other hand, Kant also recognizes distinctions between the two thinkers and argues that on some issues Wolff has not been the faithful reader of Leibniz he claims to be. The principle of sufficient reason is one of the primary points at which Kant takes issue with Wolff's interpretation of Leibnizian doctrine. Thus, when Kant responds to arguments for the principle of sufficient reason and rejects arguments for unrestricted versions of the principle he should be read as responding to the arguments of Wolff and Baumgarten (and in some cases Augustus Crusius and Eberhard) rather than those of Leibniz.⁴²

Conclusion

In reconstructions of Kant's relationship to his predecessors among the rationalists, Kant is often presented as objecting to Leibniz on the grounds that Leibniz mistakenly took the principle of sufficient reason to be an analytic truth, a claim that Kant provides plausible reasons to reject. And in several early, unpublished works, Leibniz did explore proofs of the principle that would have entailed its analyticity (and, indeed, the analyticity of *all* truths). However, we have argued that with respect to the analyticity of the principle of sufficient reason, Kant did not see Leibniz as an opponent, but as an ally. As Kant saw the matter, Leibniz would have stood with him against the efforts of Wolff and Baumgarten to derive the principle of sufficient reason from the principle of contradiction alone. Nor was Kant guilty of willful misunderstanding in his reading of Leibniz: none of Leibniz's works that were readily available to Kant and his contemporaries

⁴² In his pre-critical *New Elucidations* Kant responds at length to Crusius' objections to Wolff's formulation of and arguments for the principle. Though these passages are essential to understanding the evolution of Kant's view with respect to the principle, a careful treatment of them is outside the bounds of our present discussion.

include demonstrations of the principle, and on the few occasions in which he was explicitly challenged to provide such a demonstration, he declined to do so.

The foregoing story suggests at least two questions for further research regarding the conception of the principle of sufficient reason in the German rationalist tradition during the early modern period. As we have elaborated in section 1, Leibniz seems to have consciously refrained from offering any demonstration of the principle of sufficient reason in those of his works that he knew would be made widely available to the public. The fact that there is an important divide between Leibniz's philosophical work and the public perception of it in his own day was also observed by Russell in his classic book on Leibniz's philosophy. However, Russell saw this as a mark of the weakness of Leibniz's philosophical character. By way of explaining Leibniz's failure to publicly elaborate the true depth of his rationalism, Russell writes: "I think it probable that as [Leibniz] grew older he forgot the good philosophy which he had kept to himself, and remembered only the vulgarized version by which he won the admiration of Princes and (even more) of Princesses."⁴³ This is hardly the most charitable reading of the situation; as Russell's own case reveals, even the best philosophers may change their minds. That said, Russell is asking the right question: *why* did Leibniz so assiduously avoid developing a demonstration of the principle of sufficient reason on the basis of his deeper metaphysical commitments, such as his theory of truth? And if the answer is that he changed his mind about these deeper metaphysical commitments, for what *reason* did he do so?

A second set of questions has to do with whether the Wolff/Baumgarten approach to securing the principle of sufficient reason is truly the abject failure Kant takes it to be. Certainly the arguments that Wolff and Baumgarten provide are not persuasive as presented, for reasons already discussed. Yet Kant's deepest objection to the Wolff/Baumgarten approach is not based

⁴³ Bertrand Russell, *A Critical Exposition of the Philosophy of Leibniz*, vi.

on rejecting their arguments, but on showing the absurdity implicit in their conclusion. The principle of sufficient reason cannot be demonstrated as an analytic truth, on Kant's view, for if it could, this would entail that even things-in-themselves would have causes. However, to impute a cause to something already implies that it is being conceived through the categories, and so, by definition, things-in-themselves cannot be attributed causes.

Wolff and Baumgarten could object to this reasoning at several different points, but the strongest objection is likely to be to an implicit assumption that Kant's argument here requires: namely, that all explanation is causal explanation. Both Wolff and Baumgarten would have been happy to gloss the principle of sufficient reason as the claim that everything has an explanation. After all, both agree that what it means for there to be a sufficient reason for something, *x*, is that there is something, *y*, through which the existence of *x* can be understood or comprehended. Sometimes, the reason for *x* will be its cause; the heat of the stone is explained by its exposure to the sun's rays, which caused the heat. But — here following Leibniz — it does not seem that Wolff or Baumgarten would have accepted that *all* explanation is (efficient) causal explanation.

For example, Leibniz distinguishes the physical constraint of being *caused* to do something from the “moral constraint” of being determined to do something by our preferences (*NE*, 179). In a similar vein, Wolff writes, “The mind is free in willing and in denying insofar as it spontaneously elects, from many possibilities, that which it pleases” (*WO* §526).⁴⁴ Baumgarten likewise writes, “My free actions, as long as they are determined according to preference, are not necessitated... They are my internal determinations” (*BM* §726; cf. *BM*, “Preface to the Third

⁴⁴ We should flag the fact that Wolff's views about free will — as on many other philosophical topics — seem to have changed over the course of his career. Although the *Ontologia* he seems to embrace compatibilism and soft determinism, earlier in his correspondence with Leibniz, Wolff advocated a much more Spinozistic picture of the will: “I hold that the thoughts of the mind follow no less necessary a reason, and even that [as] the wheels in a machine are determined to motion, in this way is the mind determined to think. Freedom, I treat as the power by which the mind determines for itself its own object of thinking, such that while this determination continues, its attention is preserved” (*LW*, 47; our translation).

Edition,” 81-82). These authors all hold that the principle of sufficient reason to be compatible with the denial of the necessitarian claim that nothing could have been otherwise. If all explanations were (efficient) causal explanations, this view would be incoherent: according to the standard view at the time, efficient causes necessitate their effects; so, to say that something is not necessitated is to say it is not the result of any efficient cause. Ultimately, then, Wolff and Baumgarten could have resisted Kant’s objections to their view that the principle of sufficient reason is analytic by resisting the assumption that all explanation is causal explanation. But how best to develop the alternative to this assumption, and whether Kant might have further objections lined up, is a topic for further research.

The principle of sufficient reason is the claim that for each thing, there is some explanation for why or how this thing came to be. It is simultaneously a claim about the limits of reason and a claim about the metaphysical structure of the world. So it is no surprise that Kant, who hoped to unify the insights of both rationalism and empiricism, retained a version of the principle even while taking issue with the most extreme rationalist conceptions of it. What is surprising — but, we have argued, what is no less true — is that Kant did *not* take Leibniz’s conception of the principle to exemplify what he saw as the most troubling tendencies of the German rationalists. Leibniz claims that the principle of sufficient reason must be *added* to the principle of contradiction in order to have a satisfactory metaphysical system. In Kant’s view, this suffices to mark Leibniz as a proto-Kantian, rather than as the arch-rationalist of the modern period.

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