

Political Environment and War of Annihilation: The Controversial Relationship Between Balance, Continuity, Preservation, and Conflict in Leibniz's Harmonic View of Universal Order

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The question of conflict in Leibniz is one of the thorniest issues, and perhaps the one we are least inclined to confront. Why? Because it is undoubtedly the most problematic point in Leibniz's philosophy, and because on this question Leibniz offers an answer that we do not particularly like—one that seems to clash with the leitmotif of his metaphysics, namely universal harmony, as well as with the principles of his ethics grounded in the possibility of universal love. And yet, asking what place conflict occupies in the thought of the philosopher of harmony, and what the implications of this answer might be, is a task that we cannot avoid and one that I consider indispensable for a reflective history of ideas.

Conflict in the political domain (just as collision in the physical world) finds its place the universal order. It too is a mode of relation, a way of connecting existing beings. Indeed, conflict involves an extremely high number of relations—a very high relational density. It is likely—even if Leibniz is not explicit on this point—that this may also be one of the reasons why God chose an order in which this mode occurs: because what produces and establishes a greater number of relations is not, in itself, to be despised. Rather, it contains and develops a higher degree of reality, a kind of “deepening” of reality (to use Deleuze's terms), and is therefore more perfect according to an intensional logic, which Leibniz openly declares to prefer to an extensional one¹.

In light of the relational richness it carries with it, conflict is admitted into existence and therefore must be dealt with. We must strive, each time and within the limits of our possibilities, to situate it—to understand its place within the order.

In undertaking this effort, there are some disturbing questions that we must critically raise. Does conflict obey a law of development in Leibniz's perspective? Is it the driving force of the series within which each thing is inserted? Is it functional to progress and necessary for the pleasure that derives from its subsequent resolution? There is a clear danger in functionalizing conflict, because it means making it necessary and perpetual. And it also means requiring and presupposing a perpetual need for compensation.

In this sense, it is important to recognize and fully bring to light the lethal danger inherent in the idyllic and conciliatory vision of a pre-established harmony that resolves everything.

¹ Cf. *Nouveaux Essais sur l'entendement humain*, A VI.6, 486; See also M. Mugnai, “Leibniz e la logica Matematica”, *Cultura e Società. Rivista dell'Unione Matematica Italiana*, Vol. 3, No. 1 (2016), pp. 241-257.

Ultimately, the Leibnizian view rests on tragic assumptions from a human point of view, because conflicts may entail dramatically high costs in terms of human lives. In Leibniz's ontology, the escape route from this problem lies in the attempt to deny the possibility of disintegration for substances, and thus in an attempt to neutralize death itself. Throughout his works, Leibniz presents the idea that no substance can truly be destroyed or perish, since it is eternal, but can only unfold or enfold. Yet this ontological answer comforts us only up to a certain point. It holds only on a purely speculative plane and does not provide a compelling response at the level of political theory.

Certainly, a direct answer to the questions I have raised would require a treatment of its own and would, in any case, be too ambitious for me.

What I will try to do, instead, is to offer a related reflection that, so to speak, follows a secondary path. This secondary path crosses more circumscribed questions that may perhaps illuminate the general plane through the particular. Specifically, I will be focusing on a few notions and subtle conceptual distinctions that seem to me decisive within the framework of this discussion: first, the difference between "limit" and "boundary" (or "bond", intended as a translation for the Latin "vinculum"); second, the notions of "habitus" and "environment"; and finally, the difference between "conflict" and "war".

To begin clarifying the first distinction—that between limit and boundary—and to understand how it is relevant in this context, I propose that we try to move beyond a view of conflict in terms of 'function' and 'functionality', and see what lies beyond it. Or rather, I propose that we think this concept of 'function' more radically and more thoroughly. In what sense? Every mathematical function is analyzed, described, and "unfolded" within the framework of a limit, in the proximity of a limit. Thus, anchoring our reasoning to the concept of function implies anchoring it to the concept of limit.

At this point, then, one can attempt to give the discussion on this topic a slightly different direction—one might say, a different *folding*—by shifting the focus to another term, another concept: the concept of 'boundary' understood as *vinculum*. To avoid any ambiguity, I will henceforth prefer the Latin term.

Vinculum and limit are in themselves distinct concepts, arising in different domains, although they clearly display continuity and coherence with one another. Limit is primarily a mathematical and juridical concept, whereas *vinculum* is mainly a physical or mechanical notion, which also carries a more moral and political than strictly legal nuance.

On the physical and astronomical level, a clear example of *vinculum* could be the pivot of rotation, the axis that holds together our planet, which constitutes the environment in which we live and act. I begin with this example because it immediately shows in what sense the *vinculum* does not coincide

with limit: it is not a frontier, nor an edge that one approaches². A *vinculum* is also what regulates from within the action of God, which is ‘bound’ by the eternal truths of reason (and only consequently ‘limited’ by them in a way). This helps us understand that *vinculum* and limit are indeed, in many cases, related by derivation—the limit deriving from the *vinculum*—but, again, they are not the same thing.

Vinculum is also what holds substances together—whether one considers the ontological model of the substantial bond, or that of the dominant monad. Curiously enough, the *vinculum* understood as a fastening device is also a technical invention of Leibniz himself. In the volume of technical writings edited and published by Ernst Gerland (the German physicist and historian of technology)³, there is a text that Gerland titled *Nägel und Hämmer* (“Nails and Hammers”), in which we discover that Leibniz invented a threading system – basically still in use today – designed not only to allow the nail to penetrate the wood more easily, but also to ensure that any attempt to pull it out drives it even deeper⁴. What is particularly interesting is that, in order to devise this system, Leibniz took into account the nature of wood, which to some extent “recomposes” itself—it swells and compacts again, penetrating the grooves of the thread and thereby resisting any attempt to push the nail back out. It is the adaptive capacity of the wood, the tendency of things toward mutual accommodation, that creates the *vinculum*.

Throughout his life, Leibniz reflected on the bonds that hold compounds or aggregates together at the organic, physical, ontological, and political levels. The variety of aggregates observable in all these domains is defined precisely by the differing nature and strength of the bonds that hold them together, which in turn also depend on the adaptive capacity of the aggregates themselves.

We find ourselves in a non-static universe of conservative forces, a universe of *dynamic* conservative forces. This is the idea that underlies and provides the problematic background to Leibniz’s political thought: the idea of non-static bonds. The conservative forces discovered in the physical universe are rational means that prevent disintegration and loss of internal cohesion. Yet these forces do not oppose change and incessant motion; they do not tend toward stasis or absolute rest, that is, toward what Leibniz calls *summa quies*. In this regard, it is worth noting that nature

² In this sense, the English word ‘boundary’ would have been misleading.

³ LH 38 f. 147. The only printed reproduction of the manuscript is found in *Leibnizens nachgelassene Schriften physikalischen, mechanischen und technischen Inhalts*, hrsg. von Ernst Gerland, B. G. Teubner, Leipzig 1906, p. 244.

⁴ Enlightening references to this can also be found in M. Kempe, *The Best of All Possible Worlds A Life of Leibniz in Seven Pivotal Days*, London, Pushkin Press, 2024: “One improves the world not only on the grand scale but also with regard to small things, such as by forging a nail shaped in such a way that it becomes wedged in the wood into which it has been hammered—a kind of wall anchor, that is, that Leibniz invents more or less in passing and that today literally holds the world together” (p. 19).

rejects ‘absolutes’ (intended as the maximum degrees of things), and this is why there exist neither *corpora durissima* nor *motus celerrimi*⁵ (extremely hard bodies and extremely fast motions).

Thus, in Leibniz’s universe, *conservation does not oppose change*, and this is a maxim that holds both on a physical and on a political level. How can this be? Because change is not synonymous with annihilation. In order to prevent change from turning into annihilation, it must occur gradually. This is Leibniz’s key to everything: a progressive and incessant reform. This too is a rational principle derived from the observation of the natural world and confirmed by analytic geometry and studies on the continuum. *Natura non facit saltus*: there are no points of discontinuity; everything proceeds by degrees.

From an epistemological perspective, moreover, this way of deriving principles and general tendencies from the observation of nature is grounded in a fundamental natural theology, in which History is invested with a great revelatory capacity, showing a certain mirroring between different domains. In the first draft of a text from 1682, entitled *Ad constitutionem scientiae generalis*, we read:

History [natural and civil] is a mirror of the Divine Providence, and exhibits God [as] clothed with a certain morality, that is [...] as inventor of admirable machines, in physical matters, and in his role as King of the Minds in this Universal Republic, [...] who revealed his immense goodness to mankind through the government of Empires. (*Ad constitutionem scientiae generalis*, February 1682, Erster Ansatz, A VI.4A, 467-68; my trans.)

The appeal to History and to its revealing capacity is decisive in this discussion for several reasons. First of all, from an epistemological perspective, following the passage just quoted, History can serve as a field of verification for many discoveries and as a stimulus — a heuristic domain — for the formulation of new hypotheses. In this view, long temporal duration in itself becomes an indication and sometimes even a proof of the capacity of a given aggregate (whether natural or civil) to last.

At times, however, a reversed argument is also employed: the very union of the parts through time —and thus historical or temporal duration itself — becomes in turn a *vinculum* capable of guaranteeing that the body continues to stay united. In this regard, there is a point on which I would like to dwell a little.

When Leibniz speaks of “Empires” (as in the passage just quoted, where he says that the government of empires reveals the goodness of God), he is certainly referring to the Roman Empire and to what is considered its historical “heir,” the German Empire, that stood before his eyes and whose dignity as a political organism he sought to defend. Indeed, Empires are traditionally regarded as stratified, composite, and historically consolidated political entities. Yet, in Leibniz’s view, there is at least one exception, that is, the Spanish Empire. For Leibniz, the latter was, so to speak, an

⁵ The expression is found in *Theoria motus abstracti*, 1670/71, A VI.2, 269.

“invention” of Charles V and arose *ex abrupto*, almost all at once⁶. Its parts did not reciprocally adapt to one another, did not gradually become accustomed to that shape, did not attune their respective will (since attunement and harmony—even musical harmony—takes place in time), and ultimately did not develop the capacity to deliberate as one entity—and therefore to act. In short, they did not establish a strong bond. Here, the question of gradual change reappears, but the central point is another. What is it that produces a strong bond?

First of all, in all his political writings, Leibniz seems to suggest that a strong bond is established through the mutual adaptation of the parts (like the nail and the wood) which develop the capacity to remain united, thereby forming a common *habitus*. This *habitus* contains, in many places, a strong reference to a certain *habitudo*, that is, a certain configuration of things, both in the ethical-juridical-political sphere and in the physical one.

Now, what gives rise to a stable configuration in all those fields? A constant correspondence to a set of laws endowed with a certain uniformity and internal coherence. Law connects the parts and regulates their relations. Those parts that have not developed a common *habitus* and configuration are not even suited to cooperate—or to conspire—in pursuit of a common end. They have not become capable and properly fitted to remain united.

The notions of *habitus* and of *conspiratio* toward a common end are central in all the places where Leibniz discusses what holds aggregates together, applying them to organisms, physical systems, and civil bodies. In the text *Initium institutionum juris perpetui*, we are told that when a *habitus* conforms to the dictates of wisdom, it becomes a virtue, so that virtue can be defined as “a certain habit or custom that becomes a second nature (*in alteram naturam transiit*) and that is accompanied by an ease in acting” in a certain way⁷. And this wisdom also seems to operate in conformity with—or by analogy to—physico-mechanical and phonomic principles. In a passage of the *Remarques sur les trois volumes* of Shaftesbury, we read:

Wisdom orders that this benevolence should have degrees, just as the air, though it extends all around our globe to a great height, has greater weight and density near us than it has in the higher atmospheric regions. In the same way, one can say that the charity which bears upon those who touch us most nearly should have the greater intensity and force. (L⁸ 633; G III, 428–29)

Thus, in human interactions, the consolidation of a *habitus* also seems to involve a principle of physical and environmental continuity.

⁶ Cf. *Inquirenda ut desiderata ratione juris Austriaci in Successionem Hispanicam*, 1700, A IV.8, 134.

⁷ *Initium institutionum juris perpetui*, 1695, Mollat I, p. 3.

⁸ *Philosophical Papers and Letters*, ed. and trans. by Leroy E. Loemker, 2nd ed., Dordrecht and Boston, Reidel, 1969.

The notion of ‘environment’ (*milieu*) is a central—though sometimes latent—concept in Leibniz’s thought. Indeed, his whole restless physical investigation on the necessity of postulating the ether is centered on this notion: a *milieu*, an environmental fluid capable of connecting all the bodies immersed within it, while also exerting pressure upon them, thereby ensuring the propagation of motion. A careful analysis of the harmonic circulation of the ether reveals a need for connection and action in Leibniz’s physical universe. And there is more. If we look at Leibniz’s theory of planetary motion (in which, of course, the mechanism of action at a distance is staunchly rejected), we find, for example, that the attractive power of the Sun works insofar as it is able to stimulate a response from the surrounding environmental fluid. The fluid responds by giving rise to vortices, whose movement carries the planets along. For this reason, Leibniz suggests that gravitational attraction might more properly be called “gravitational solicitation”⁹.

The physical framework explaining the action of the environmental fluid reveals the need for a strong reciprocity among the forces at play. In the civil sphere—as Leibniz observes with regard to the Spanish Empire—there can be no cohesion among the parts of a body that do not share an environment (whether physical or cultural) capable of bringing them into contact and *keeping* them connected¹⁰. Why? Essentially because, in the absence of such connection, there would be no dynamic interaction among the parts, which constitutes the precondition for any form of cohesion.

In a universe of bonds, *habitus*, conservative and restitutive forces (such as the one commonly called *le ressort*), it is the dynamic motion of the parts—and not some form of rest understood as stillness—that determines the cohesion of bodies. In his early writings, Leibniz had already observed:

Boyle himself rightly doubts that there exists an absolute state of rest in bodies, and therefore one cannot be certain that stability (*consistentia*) is caused by a state of rest. Indeed, not to conceal anything, the more deeply I investigate the matter, the more I become convinced that there is no absolute rest (*quietem absolutam*) in bodies. (Leibniz to Henry Oldenburg, October 1671, A II.1, 271; my trans.)¹¹

In line with this conviction, Leibniz later directed at the Abbé de Saint-Pierre’s project the criticism that would eventually become famous (and that Kant himself reprises at the beginning of *Perpetual Peace*):

I have seen something of the project of M. de St Pierre, for maintaining a perpetual peace in Europe. I am reminded of a device in a cemetery, with the words: *Pax perpetua*; for the dead do not fight any longer: but the living are of another humor. (Leibniz to De Grimarest, June 4th, 1712; R¹² 183; Dutens V, 65)

⁹ *Tentamen de Motuum Coelestium Causis*, GM VI, 152.

¹⁰ Cf. *Conspectus brevis juris Austriaci in successionem Hispanicam*, November 1700, A IV.8, 164 ; *Lettre écrite d’Amsterdam*, 1701, A IV.9, 193, 197.

¹¹ See also Leibniz to Arnauld, November 1671, A II.1, 278-280.

¹² *Leibniz: Political Writings*, ed. and trans. by P. Riley, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1972.

Absolute rest is that which dissolves bonds—bonds that are themselves dynamic. The unity of aggregates arises from motion: from an internal conspiring motion and from an external pressure. Throughout his life, in reflecting on the causes of cohesion, Leibniz would appeal to this double movement: an internal conspiring motion and a pressure exerted from the outside (through the environmental fluid). Depending on the period, the relative importance of each motion varies. What remains constant is that—from the Mainz period to the years following the Paris period, and from the *Animadversiones* on Descartes to the correspondence with Hartsoeker—he never ceased to revisit this issue. In 1677, for example, he wrote to Honoré Fabri:

It is evident that external pressure is the primary cause of cohesion, while the conspiring motion of the parts is the proximate cause, but only insofar as it derives from a persistent external cause. Thus, it is the concurrence of these conditions that renders the body solid (Leibniz to Honoré Fabri, early 1677, A II.1, 452; my trans.)

From this formulation—which I have chosen deliberately—it seems that the conspiratorial motion itself is triggered by the existence of an “external cause” (much like the mechanism by which the Sun’s attractive power stimulates a response in the environmental fluid). Thus, the cooperative character of this conspiring motion is subtly accompanied by a simultaneous “defensive” function. In other words, the parts conspire and unite precisely to resist any disaggregating force acting from the outside, that is, “for the sake of security,” which is precisely the purpose for which political communities arise, as Leibniz had already stated in the *Elementa juris naturalis*¹³.

This interpretation is confirmed in a letter to Hartsoeker of October 30th, 1710, where Leibniz writes that bodies exhibit cohesion “precisely because (*à mesure que*) the motions within them are disturbed by separation and oppose it”¹⁴.

Ultimately, this implies postulating a latent, perpetual conflict that is always, to some degree, counterbalanced. According to this model, European equilibrium should be conceived and maintained based on certain general tendencies of systems. It is important to acknowledge the fact that bodies, through the surrounding environment, can exert reciprocal pressure without annihilating one another, and one needs to reflect on the conditions under which this is made possible. That passage from the letter to Hartsoeker suggests that the condition for counterbalance is that the bodies “disturbed” or “threatened” by separation are capable of resisting it.

This implies that each political body must work to acquire the prerequisites for strong internal cohesion, namely those we have discussed so far: it must not be a body with excessively dispersed

¹³ Cf. *Elementa juris naturalis* 122, A VI.I, 446.

¹⁴ Leibniz to Hartsoeker, October 30th, 1710, G III, 505.

parts (as in the case of the Spanish Empire); it must develop a common *habitus*, which essentially entails consolidating a system of coherent laws and shared traditions that enable effective organization; and it must be a territorial entity of an average size—that is, neither too small nor too weak, so as to avoid vulnerability to dispersal or domination by a much larger and more powerful neighboring body¹⁵.

The idea, then, is to work toward constructing, through small and gradual changes, arrangements in which there is no great disproportion among the parts, which are thereby held together by environmental bonds that naturally tend to dampen conflict, which remains inevitable. A ‘bound’ (that is, constrained) type of conflict is a controlled conflict: it is not a cause of annihilation or disintegration, but rather acts as a stimulus for the cohesion and unity of others. This can then be seen as the positive “function”—it is appropriate here to revive the concept—of conflict properly bound by environmental connections: namely, that it politically neutralizes the possibility of annihilatory war, while also reducing the likelihood of war itself.

Conflict and war are not synonymous, and here we arrive at the final distinction I wished to highlight: annihilatory war represents the maximum degree of conflict. Such extreme degrees are contrary to cohesion, stability, and harmony. What Leibniz seeks, instead, is to establish conditions that ensure that—even in turbulent political scenarios—environmental factors prevent sudden detonations or uncontrollable escalations. Clearly, a dispute can only be resolved fairly if all contenders remain active agents with their identities intact. Already in the *Nova Methodus*, we read:

Equity requires that, against one who has harmed me, I do not wage a war of annihilation, but rather seek restitution (*Nova methodus discendae docendaeque Jurisprudentiae*, 1667, pt. II, A VI.1, 344; my trans.).

Leibniz’s account, however, is not meant simply as a prefiguration of the bourgeois commercial society, in which conflict tends never to erupt due to rational-calculative considerations, such as cost–benefit analysis. At this point, we can fully see the failure of that explanatory model. Instead, the focus of Leibniz’s political, physical, and ontological discourse lies in the neutralization of the possibility of annihilation, and the value of this argument might still warrant further reflection.

¹⁵ In this regard, see what Leibniz wrote in his *Securitas publica* about the possibility for the Duchy of Neuburg to stand against France after Louis XIV’s territorial expansion in the Palatinate: *Bedenken welchergestalt Securitas publica* [usw.] §56, November 21st, 1671, second part, A IV.1, p. 201.