

Knowledge and Suffering in Early Modern Philosophy: G.W. Leibniz and Anne Conway

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A volume on “emotional minds” in the early modern period would be incomplete without a discussion of the passions of Christ. His passions constitute a centerpiece of the Christian narrative, which itself forms the backdrop for much of early modern thought. As Sabrina Ebbersmeyer makes clear in our Introduction, the papers of this volume consider the boundary between human passions and reason, the relation between passions and cognition, and the means by which passions might help in pursuing the truth.¹ The suffering of Christ is the point at which the passions, reason, and cognition collide. This paper explores the components of that collision and examines how Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz (1646-1716) and Anne Finch Conway (1631-79) respond to them.

1. Knowledge and Suffering: The Passions of Christ

The most relevant part of the Christian story goes like this. Jesus of Nazareth was tortured in significant ways after his condemnation. Among other things, he was whipped and forced to wear a crown of thorns while carrying a cross, an instrument of his own death. These tortures are both physical and psychological. In the last moments of his life, he felt forsaken by God, his father. It is very gruesome stuff.

Its gruesomeness produced some difficult philosophical problems. For example, the scholastics were concerned to explain how Jesus, as God, could suffer. If Christ suffered physical pain, then his divinity appears uncertain. If he did not, then his sacrifice for humanity seems diminished. Many philosophers sought to find a way to accommodate the real pain of Christ’s suffering within his divinity. Scholastics debated the proper way to do this. As Dominik Perler notes, by the late 13th century, the physical

¹ See Ebbersmeyer’s Introduction. As far as I can tell, there has been no systematic study by historians of philosophy of the place of Christ’s passions in the wider context of early modern views of the passions. For example, neither *The Cambridge History of Seventeenth-Century Philosophy* nor the new *Oxford Handbook of Philosophy in Early Modern Europe* contains nothing on the topic. See, Garber/Ayers 1998; Wilson/Clarke 2011. Jolley’s paper “The Relation between Theology and Philosophy” in Garber/Ayers 1998 ignores the topic.

pain of Christ was taken to be a sensory *passio* distinct from other sorts of passions. Philosophers like John Buridan and John Duns Scotus offered explanations tied closely to an account of the will.² In this paper, I ignore these worries. The focus here is the relations among passions, reason, and cognition.³

Recent medievalists have argued that a “revolution of feeling” occurred in the 12th-13th centuries when devotional literature began to focus on “the Passion.” As J.A.W. Bennett puts it: “one of the greatest revolutions in feeling that Europe has ever witnessed” occurred during that period: the rise of compassionate devotion to the suffering of Christ.⁴ According to Sarah McNamer in a recent study, between the 12th and 16th centuries, Europe saw an increase in the richness and variety of “affective meditations” on the passions.⁵ These meditations “ask their readers to imagine themselves present at scenes of Christ’s suffering and to perform compassion for that suffering victim in a private drama of the heart.” Not only was the meditator supposed to feel compassion for Christ, she was supposed to learn something in doing so. These writings “were not crafted primarily to be admired – even by God – as aesthetic artifacts. They had serious, practical work to do: to teach their readers, through iterative affective performance, how to feel.”⁶

The image of the suffering Christ persisted through the Reformation, and forms the backdrop to early modern discussions of the passions. Late medieval and early modern artworks will help frame this discussion. The *Isenheim Altarpiece* of 1512-13 by Matthias Grünewald is particularly helpful. Its *Crucifixion* (figure 1) is harrowing. The roughhewn wood of the cross bends under the weight of the dead body, whose skin tone is a putrid greenish grey. *Rigor mortis* has set in so the fingers are frozen in torment; the

² See Perler 2011, 127-143. Also find there references to Perler’s earlier studies on related topics.

³ For the classic study of the passions in the early modern period, see James 1997. Also see, Shapiro 2003. James explains: “Passions, then, are generally understood to be thoughts or states of the soul which represent things as good or evil for us, and are therefore seen as objects of inclination or aversion.... [They] have intrinsic physical manifestations which bridge emotion and action and are written on the body in facial expressions, blushings, trembling, and postures” (4). In this paper, the focus is primarily on physical and psychological suffering.

⁴ Bennett 1982, 32.

⁵ McNamer 2010, 1. For other important studies of the evolution in medieval Europe of a focus on the physicality of the body of Christ and related topics, see Bynum 1987 and Beckwith 1993.

⁶ McNamer 2010, 2. Since Bynum 1987, scholars have increasingly discussed the gendered aspect of such meditations. For a summary, see McNamer 2010, 3-9.

legs, arms and torso are covered with cuts and oozing blood. The witnesses to the death react in radically different ways. The Madonna seems ready to swoon from the intensity of her grief while John the Evangelist, also grieving, comforts her. The plainness of the colors in their robes – vivid white and a rich, dark red – echo the simplicity of their emotions and contrast sharply with the complexity of the Magdalene’s garb and tormented prayer. More than the others lamenters, she is wracked with emotion. Reason prevails on the right side of the painting where John the Baptist holds the Bible in one hand and points to Christ with the other, accompanying “He must increase, but I must decrease” (John 3:30). This response to Christ’s death is not one of passion, but of reason. John the Baptist exhibits unemotional understanding: the passions of the left side of the *Crucifixion* “must” happen and are therefore part of the order of things.

The *Isenheim Altarpiece* contains several other panels including a *Resurrection*. The contrast between the heavy death of the crucifixion and the weightless illumination of the *Resurrection* is striking (figure 2). Many of the same colors appear in both: bright white, darkish red, burnt orange, and light green. In the *Crucifixion* these colors enfold the lamenting observers; in the *Resurrection* they cocoon the joy of immortality. The altarpiece suggests an overarching order within which suffering occurs. By meditating on the stark contrast between the suffering and the joy, the viewer is asked to learn something important about that order.⁷

Grünewald’s altarpiece contains two very different responses to the death of Christ: one passionate, the other rational. We find these opposing reactions vividly captured in other late medieval and early modern representations of the Madonna’s lamentation. As affective meditations increased in popularity between the 13th and 16th centuries, the popularity of the *pietà* (pity) as a subject of painting and sculpture unsurprisingly increased as well.

⁷ For an account of early modern accounts of grief and the background to them, see James 1997 who notes that emotions were often divided into pairs and that one pair is sadness (*dolor*) and joy (*delectatio*). See 6-7.

The *Roettgen Pietà*, ca.1325, by an unknown German artist, represents the moment of despair when Mary recognizes the depth of her loss (figure 3).⁸ The work's sculpted instability captures the deep passion of the moment. Mary sits on what appears to be a thrown that itself rests on heavy slabs. Like the slabs, the weight of her lower body seems solid enough. But the deeply carved and asymmetrical rhythms of her robe combine with the terrifying similarity between the exploding wounds of Christ's body and the rosettes of the base to undermine any sense of stability. The odd center of gravity of the upper half of the work increases this visual strain. Not only would the Madonna's weight and strength not sustain this dead body, the awkward angle of Jesus' head magnifies the tension and drama of this central part of the sculpture. The rigidity of the son's limbs conflict both with the head's arc and with the naturalness of Mary's arms. Given the horror of her son's recent death, the intensity of her pain is fully present. With her unfocused eyes, open mouth, and head bent to echo his unnatural tilt, she crumples into her thrown in despair. This pain is entirely of the moment and seems to demand that the viewer share in her grief. The passion here does not cross the boundary into cognition. Rather, the *Roettgen Pietà* encourages the viewer to share in this present passion.

A French pietà (figure 4) of the 15th century contains the different responses to Christ's death that we found in the *Isenheim Altarpiece*. Of the four lamenters, only the Magdalene is gripped with emotion while the other three figures, including the Madonna, have found their way to a rational state of contemplation. By the end of the 15th century in Italy, the pietà had often moved beyond passions to what seems a wholly rational meditation. In Pietro Perugino's *Pietà* of 1490, rational contemplation has replaced suffering. Although the signs of Christ's wounds have not been totally removed, he is offered to the viewer as an object to contemplate (figure 5). Consistent with the narrative offered by John the Baptist in the *Isenheim Altarpiece*, Christ's passions have become part of the order of things. The painting's subdued colors and perfect linear perspective express quiet introspection. By placing the Madonna's head at the perspective's

⁸ Scholars argue that the *Roettgen Pietà* is one of the first of its kind. For an interesting discussion of the work and its relation to other late medieval German representations of Mary, see Satzinger and Ziegeler 1993, "Marienklagen und Pietà" pp. 241-76.

vanishing point, Perugino situates the Madonna in an eternal space of contemplation. There is no emotion here and no moment in time; rather, there is contemplation and eternity. Finally, consider Michelangelo's famous Vatican *Pietà* of 1499 (figure 6). Here, Mary is a beautiful young woman coolly offering her son to the viewer. The only sign of grief or emotion of any kind is due to the deeply carved marble folds of her clothing. They hold the residue of passion, but the main effect of the work is an idealization of grief. The Madonna has become like John the Baptist in the *Isenheim Altarpiece*: she understands and asks us to meditate on the rational order of things of which her son's passions are a part.

As noted previously, our volume raises questions about the boundary between human passions and reason, the relation between passions and cognition, and the means by which passions might help in pursuing the truth. The artworks discussed here suggest answers: the suffering of Christ (and perhaps suffering in general) is part of the order of things, cognitive benefits result from recognizing cases of suffering as part of that order, and the proper experience of the transition from a state of suffering to one of non-suffering enables one to grasp truths about that order. One is led to glimpse the rightness or justice of things.

2. The Boundaries between Reason and Passion

The remainder of this paper examines the views of Conway and Leibniz on our questions about the relation between the passions and cognition.⁹ As a means to situate Conway and Leibniz in the wider context of early modern philosophy, it will be helpful to offer a list of features common to both.

Leibniz and Conway are both *rationalists* in that they believe: (a) the world perfectly manifests the rationality and goodness of God and (b) human reason by itself can grasp fundamental truths about God and the world. Conway insists, for example,

⁹ I cannot present a full discussion here of the tension between reason and passion in early modern philosophy. For a thorough account of the topic, see James 1997.

“whatever is correctly understood is most true and certain.”¹⁰ The “precepts of truth,” she explains, are “innate ideas” which “all men find in themselves” (*Principles* VI §2 (29)).

Leibniz and Conway are both radically *ecumenical* in that neither takes Christianity to be a necessary condition for knowledge about God. Familiarity with Christian doctrines like the Trinity and Eucharist is neither necessary nor sufficient for such knowledge. For the sake of convenience here, let’s just call the relevant knowledge *divine knowledge* where divine knowledge is a human cognition (however partial) of some aspect, property, or attribute of God. Thinkers like Conway and Leibniz assume that this is the most significant knowledge there is. Their ecumenicalism is important for us because it presumes that the human intellect is capable of having such knowledge outside of any particular religious context.

Given the rationalism and ecumenicalism of Leibniz and Conway, it is not immediately clear how suffering is supposed to fit into this epistemological picture. So, it is particularly interesting that they take *suffering to have significant moral and cognitive benefits*. Both consider suffering a necessary condition for some of the most important divine knowledge human beings can have.

3. Conway

The metaphysics of Conway’s *Principles Concerning the Most Ancient and Modern Philosophies* (finished in the 1670s) is enormously complicated.¹¹ There are three features of her metaphysics especially relevant to our topic.

God, Christ, Created World

According to Conway, there are three distinct substances: God, Christ, and the created world. God, the first substance, emanates Christ, the second substance, who then emanates the world. As middle substance between God and the created world, Christ is

¹⁰ Conway 1996. Abbreviated in what follows as *Principles* with references to book, section, and page number from Coudert and Corse translation. So, citation here is (VI §4 (30)) which is Book VI, section 4, p. 30.

¹¹ Conway composed her work in English, but that manuscript was lost after Henry More translated and published it in Latin. There is little reason therefore to fuss about the Latin terms and phraseology found in the *Principles*. For an important study of Conway’s life and thought, see Hutton (2004). For an introduction to some of her concerns, see Coudert 1996, Introduction. For a recent account that situates Conway within religious concerns broadly construed, see White 2008.

the metaphysical conduit and mediator between God and creatures.¹² The created world is one big infinitely complex vital substance, whose various modes constitute individual creatures. The world contains an infinity of creatures *in finitum* and is constituted of the same vital stuff although the vitality can differ radically. Creatures are constituted of an active principle and a passive one where each differs from the other only in the degree of its vitality. Regardless of the changes in the world, Conway maintains that “the substance or essence always remains the same” and there is “merely a change of form in as much as the substance relinquishes one form and takes on another” (*Principles*, VI §3 (29-30)).

Finally, the created world is constantly bettering itself so that all creatures eventually become conscious moral beings and attain the “excellent attributes” of “spirit and light.” Every created thing is capable of “every kind of feeling, perception, or knowledge, even love, all power and virtue, joy and fruition.” She explains that even

dust and sand are capable of all these perfections through various successive transmutations which, according to the natural order of things, require long periods of time for their consummation, even though [...] God, if he so pleases, may accelerate everything and accomplish them in a single moment.

God has so arranged things because he “sees that it is more fitting for all things ... to attain, through their own efforts, ever greater perfection as instruments of divine wisdom, goodness, and power, which operate in them and with them” (*Principles* IX §6 (66)). Of particular importance to us here is the fact that all created things will eventually become conscious and, as such, will move toward greater and greater perfection. They will not

¹² The causal notion of emanation endorsed by Conway and Leibniz can be summarized as follows: God produces the world through emanation. In emanating the world and its creatures, God is not changed and yet creatures acquire the divine attributes and the essences. Each of the attributes of perfection, self-sufficiency, unity, and being is a function of the other in the sense that the more perfection something has, the more unity, and so on. God is a causal principle that explains the thing (or things) it immediately produces; these products themselves can then act as the causal principle for other things. The result of this two (or more) tiered process of emanation is a hierarchy of being. At each level in the emanative hierarchy, the higher level emanates its attributes or “Ideas” (e.g., Justice) to the lower level in such a way that neither the higher entity (the cause) nor its attribute is depleted in any way, while the lower entity (the product) comes to instantiate the attribute, though in a weaker or inferior manner. The emanative process is continual so that the lower entity instantiates the attribute just as long as the higher emanates the attribute to it. Given that God has the highest degree of perfection, self-sufficiency, unity, and reality and given that the Ideas (e.g., Justice) that God contains are perfect, the emanative relation entails that each product of God exists at a lower level of being than God and has a lesser degree of perfection, self-sufficiency, simplicity, reality, and so on. For many early modern Platonists, the products of God’s emanation contain all the divine attributes (or “Ideas”), though in a manner inferior to the way in which they exist in God. For more on this topic, see Mercer 2001 *passim*. For more on emanative causation in Conway, see Mercer (forthcoming).

attain the perfection of God: “Thus a creature is capable of a further and more perfect degree of life, ever greater and greater to infinity, but it can never attain equality with God. For his infinity is always more perfect than a creature in its highest elevation” (*Principles* IX §7 (67)).

Ecumenical Rationalism

In the very first chapters of her *Principles*, Conway makes clear both her rationalism and ecumenical goals. She offers a contemplation of the attributes of God and optimistically claims that these can be “communicated to creatures” (*Principles* II §4 (13)). She explains: “And thus the truly invisible attributes of God are clearly seen if they are understood either through or in those things which have been made” (*Principles* III §6 (17)). Conway intends to explain the proper way to understand these attributes. Having done so, she assumes that everyone – whatever their religious perspective – can have divine knowledge, namely, knowledge of the attributes of God. Conway insists that “Jews, Turks [Muslims], and other people” can grasp the divine attributes (at least partially).

After a thorough discussion of God’s attributes, Conway moves to Christ as the middle of the three substances and what directly causes and explains the order, rationality, and goodness of the created world. The nature of this middle substance is complicated, but roughly, Christ is “the word” or “Logos” by which “God knows all things.” As such it is *logos ousios*, what God understands in the eternal contemplation of the divine essence. But Christ is also *logos proforikos*, the *logos* made real. Neither *logoi* is the historic Christ who suffered the passions. The *logos ousios* is best understood as the plan or blueprint as conceived by God; the *logos proforikos* is that plan instantiated in the world. The former is unchanging and eternally perfect, the latter is changeable and has the “power” to move “from one good to another” (*Principles* V §3 (24)). An analogy might help here. The *logos ousios* is like the score of a symphony: a static design for the performance itself; the *logos proforikos* is the performance of the work as an ever changing, though perfectly designed, unified whole.¹³

¹³ For a more technical account of the relation between *logos ousios* and *logos proforikos*, see Mercer (forthcoming).

In order to understand Conway's views about suffering, it is important to see how Christ "the son [of God] himself is immediately present in all things and immediately fills all things. In fact, he works immediately in everything in his own way" (*Principles* V §4 (25)). Like the musical score, Christ is present everywhere by having determined exactly what is being performed although the score on paper stands statically outside any particular performance. Christ is also present in every performed note in that the score is being performed. The string section moves through its crescendo while the flutes are silent and yet the violins' music and the flutes' silence are a manifestation of the score. Our analogy offers some help in understanding what Conway means when she says: "the son [of God] himself is immediately present in all these creatures so that he may bless and benefit them." Like the score, Christ as *logos ousios*, is the plan for the world; like the performing orchestra, Christ as *logos proforikos* is the plan unfolding. Since the world, for Conway, is always becoming morally better, Christ is always benefitting the world and its creatures by making them better. And the better they become, the more like God they are. In brief, "he raises them by his action to union with God" (*Principles* V §4 (25-26)).

Conway's decision to call the second substance Christ is a fascinating strategy to engage non-Christians in the Christian narrative. Anyone moved by her metaphysics and its account of "that excellent order ... which appears in all things" will embrace Christ as *logos* and therefore as mediator. She explains that "the wiser among the Jews recognize [...] such a mediator, which they call by different names such as Logos, [...] Mind, Wisdom, the Celestial Adam, etc." When "these matters are correctly considered, they will contribute greatly to the propagation of true faith and Christian religion among Jews and Turks [Muslims] and other infidel nations." It is important to note that Conway is not so much concerned to convert non-Christians to Christian orthodoxy as to engage thoughtful people of all faiths in the metaphysical idea that there is a second substance that mediates between God and creatures:

Therefore, those who acknowledge such a mediator and believe in him can be said truly to believe in Jesus Christ, even though they do not yet know it and are not convinced that he has already come in the flesh. But if they first grant that there is a mediator, they will indubitably come to acknowledge also, even if they are unwilling, that Christ is the mediator" (*Principles* VI §5 (31-32)).

It is a brilliant ecumenical strategy.

Suffering, Cognition, and Moral Improvement

The Christian narrative maintains that the human soul will be immortal only if Christ suffers. So, the moral order of God's world seems to require the passions. Conway takes up this idea and makes it a centerpiece of her philosophy. For her, suffering is the key to moral and cognitive improvement. Like Christ, human beings suffer in life; and like him, they do so for the good of the world. But Conway goes beyond the standard Christian story by extending moral improvement to all creatures.¹⁴ Whatever the creature (roach, rat, or rhododendron), it suffers for the sake of the good and therefore bears a connection to the historic Christ.

By giving suffering such a central role in her metaphysics, Conway builds a close connection between the historic Christ and all creatures:

Yet when Christ became flesh and entered into his body [...], he took on something of our nature and consequently of the nature of everything [...]. In assuming flesh and blood, he sanctified nature so that he could sanctify everything, just as it is the property of a ferment to ferment the whole mass.

[He] descended into time and for a certain period willingly subjected himself to its laws to the extent that he suffered great torment and death itself. But the death did not detain him long, for on the third day he rose again, and the purpose of all his suffering, up to his death and burial, was to heal, preserve, and restore creatures from corruption and death, which came upon them through the Fall" (*Principles* V §6 (27)).

What is striking about Conway's version of the Christian narrative is that the historic Christ "took on ... the nature of everything" and simultaneously acted as the "ferment of it all." The nature of everything in the third substance is vitality, though the vitality here is in time. At the very beginning of the *Principles*, she insists that "in God there exists none of the passions ... [f]or every passion is temporal having its beginning and end in time" (*Principles* I §5 (9)). So, Christ as *logos proforikos* emanated the historic Christ who thereby became a particular mode of vitality. As such, he sanctified and healed everything.

¹⁴ For more on Conway's "moral perfectionism," see White 2008, Part I.

The Isenheim Altarpiece helps explain how the passions of Christ could act to “ferment the whole mass.” As the Crucifixion (figure 1) suggests, passions are part of the order of things. As the transition from the Crucifixion to the Resurrection (figure 2) implies, there is an overarching order, in which the suffering occurs and whose end is joy. By meditating on this transition, one becomes aware – as did John the Baptist – that there is an order to things. One *understands* something about the order of the world.¹⁵

But one does more than understand. In suffering, creatures increase in connectedness and vitality. For Conway, one of the most basic features of the third substance is that all of its parts are in sympathetic harmony with all the others:

God has implanted a certain universal sympathy and mutual love into his creatures so that they are all members of one body and all, so to speak, brothers, for whom there is one common father [...] There is also one mother, that unique substance or entity from which all things have come forth, and of which they are the real parts and members” (VI §4 (31)).

Conway, Leibniz, and many other early modern thinkers share this notion of sympathetic harmony.¹⁶ The basic assumption is that the goodness of the world is partly a function of the variety of the creatures within it, partly a function of the sum of the goodness of the creatures within it, and partly a function of the order among those creatures where the latter is understood primarily in terms of the an enhancement relation among them. Many thinkers believed that (some or all) created things have an enhancement relation with (some or all) other creatures. When two creatures are in an enhancement relation, an increase in the goodness of one will promote an increase in the goodness of another, although the relation is non-reciprocal (that is, the increase in the second will not then promote an increase in the first). So, for Conway, each part of the third substance is in sympathy with every other in the sense that it bears an enhancement relation with it.

The sympathy among creatures is important for two reasons. Creatures benefit morally from the suffering of other creatures. Consistent with the enhancement relation, the suffering of one creature increases the goodness of all other creatures. But creatures also benefit in straightforward metaphysical ways: for Conway, suffering makes the sufferer more vital and hence metaphysically better. She writes: “all pain and torment

¹⁵ James discusses the view of some early modern philosophers that there is an “emotional knowledge” and a “knowledge of the heart”. For more on this, see James 1997, chapter 10, especially 234-42.

¹⁶ For a fuller account of these notions in the period, see Mercer 2001, chapter 6 and Mercer (forthcoming).

stimulates the life or spirit existing in everything that suffers” (*Principles* VII §1 (43)). The third substance is essentially vital stuff that differs in degrees of vitality; the more vital something is, the more spiritual it is and hence the more like God; and the more spiritual it is, the more “the divine attributes” are “communicated” to creatures. Despite the temporary evil of some creatures, the world is progressing toward perfection. Even the most crass and immoral creatures will eventually achieve moral goodness through suffering: “the worst creatures ... become good after many and long torments and punishments” (*Principles* VII Summary (41)). Divine justice is such that sinners must pay for their transgressions, but the payment or punishment will itself promote moral improvement:

Just as all the punishments inflicted by God on his creatures are in proportion to their sin, so they tend, even the worst, to their good and to their restoration and they are so medicinal as to cure these sickly creatures and restore them to a better conditions than they previously enjoyed (*Principles* VI §10 (38)).

Despite the temporary evil of some creatures, the world is constantly progressing toward perfection. The improvement of both the world and its creatures depends on suffering. Her position is dramatic: in the same way that the historic Christ suffered for the good of the world, so every creature suffers and thereby contributes to worldly good. In the end, all parts of the third substance will become morally good through suffering; suffering is a sufficient condition for metaphysical improvement and eventually moral goodness.

Finally, Conway suggests that as creatures become metaphysically better, they also become cognitively better: they *understand* more about the unity of things and then about their justice. As creatures become more vital, they become more conscious of the unity between themselves and all other creatures. And as they become more conscious of this unity, they begin to grasp the justice in the world. She writes: “the justice of God gloriously appears in the transmutation of things” (*Principles* VI Summary (28)). Indeed, “the justice of God shines forth wonderfully” as creatures understand more about the role of suffering in the world (*Principles* VI §8 (36)). We are capable of grasping the “principle of true justice” because “God endowed man with the ... instinct for justice” (*Principles* VI §7 (35)).

4. Leibniz

Leibniz made significant contributions to philosophy, logic, mathematics, physics, jurisprudence, and history. He worked as diplomat, engineer, attorney, and political advisor. He corresponded with kings and princesses, and with the most eminent intellectuals of the age. As a philosopher, Leibniz is probably best known for his view that this is the best of all possible worlds. This optimism was fully felt by Leibniz in that he was delighted with the world, but it was also coupled with a realism about human suffering. Throughout his long and varied life, he was concerned with the state of humanity and how to relieve its afflictions.¹⁷

Leibniz's philosophy is enormously complicated and developed over many decades. Scholars continue to disagree about the most accurate way of describing some of his basic doctrines. I cannot offer an overview of his philosophy here. A brief summary will have to suffice of those claims that form the background to his views about the boundary between human passions and reason, the relation between passions and cognition, and the means by which passions might help in pursuing the truth.

God, Substances, and Created World

Like Conway, Leibniz believed in a perfectly good God who creates and maintains the world through emanation. In the *Discours de metaphysique* of 1686, he explains: "It is very evident that created substances depend upon God, who preserves them and who even produces them continually by a kind of emanation, just as we produce our thoughts."¹⁸ Concerning the relation between God and creatures: "For one sees clearly that all other substances depend on God in the same way as thoughts emanate from our substance, that God is all in all, and that he is intimately united with all

¹⁷ For a full account of Leibniz's fascinating life see Antognazza 2009. For an account of Leibniz's views about justice, see Riley 2006. Also see Rutherford 1995, passim.

¹⁸ Unless otherwise noted, all citations to Leibniz's works will be from Leibniz 1923, abbreviated here as 'A'. Translations are usually based on Leibniz 1989. The *Discours de metaphysique* is in A VI iv [B]; references are to section numbers. *Discours de metaphysique*, § 14: "[I]l est premierement tres manifeste que les substances creees dependent de Dieu, qui les conserve, et même qui les produit continuellement par une maniere d'emanation, comme nous produisons nous pensées."

creatures.”¹⁹ Not only is every substance an emanation of God, each is a constantly acting substance that expresses and reflects everything else. Like Conway, Leibniz endorses both universal sympathy and the enhancement relation among creatures. But he goes farther than Conway in claiming that the only interaction among creatures is one of sympathetic harmony. For Leibniz, the individual things of the world – what he first calls ‘substances’ and then, later in life, ‘monads’ – do not causally interact. In *Discours de metaphysique* §32, he explains:

Now, in rigorous metaphysical truth, there is no external cause acting on us except God alone, and he alone communicates himself to us immediately in virtue of our continual dependence. From this it follows that there is no other external object that touches our soul and immediately excites our perception. Thus we have ideas of everything in our soul by virtue of God’s continual action on us, that is to say, because every effect expresses its cause, and thus the essence of our soul is a certain expression, imitation or image of the divine essence, thought, and will, and of all the ideas comprised in it. It can then be said that God is our immediate external object and that we see all things by him... God is the sun and the light of souls, the light that lights every man that comes into this world, and this is not an opinion new to our times.²⁰

God emanates all the divine attributes to individual souls, which express the essence of God and bear an enhancement relation to each other. Leibniz claims that every creature expresses and “imitates” God, though each has its own distinctive degree of clarity:

*Every individual substance contains in its perfect notion the entire universe and everything that exists in it, past, present, and future. [...] Indeed, all created substances are different expressions of the same universe and different expressions of the same universal cause, namely, God. But the expressions vary in perfection, just as different representations or drawings of the same town from different points of view do.*²¹

¹⁹ *Discours de metaphysique*, § 32: “Car on voit fort clairement que toutes les autres substances dependent de Dieu comme les pensées emanent de nostre substance; que Dieu est tout en tous, et comment il est uni intimement à toutes les creatures”.

²⁰ *Discours de metaphysique* § 28: “Or dans la rigueur de la verité Metaphysique, il n’y a point de cause externe qui agisse sur nous, excepté Dieu seul, et luy seul communique avec nous immédiatement en vertu de nostre dependance continuelle. D’où il s’ensuit qu’il n’y a point d’autre objet externe, qui touche nostre ame, et qui excite immédiatement nostre perception. Aussi n’avons nous dans nostre ame les idées de toutes choses, qu’en vertu de l’action continuelle de Dieu sur nous, c’est à dire parce que tout effect exprime sa cause, et qu’ainsi l’essence de nostre ame est une certaine expression, imitation ou image de l’essence, pensée et volonté divine, et de toutes les idées qui y sont comprises. On peut donc dire, que Dieu seul est nostre objet immediat hors de nous, et que nous voyons toutes choses par luy [...] Dieu est le soleil et la lumiere des ames, *lumen illuminans omnem hominem venientem in hunc mundum*. Et ce n’est pas d’aujourd’huy qu’on est dans ce sentiment.”

²¹ “*Omnis substantia singularis in perfecta notione sua involvit totum universum, omniaque in eo existentia praeterita praesentia et futura. [...] Imo omnes substantiae singulares creatae sunt diversae expressiones*

In a very early text, Leibniz works out some of his views about substantial activity and unity in an essay entitled “*On the Incarnation of God.*” He offers a fascinating solution to the problem about how Christ can be both God and man.²² Given our concerns here, it is significant that the historical Christ is also an expression of divinity and itself “contained” in every other. To make the point another way, every substance mirrors and contains Christ.

Leibniz firmly agrees with Conway that the created world is constituted of an infinity of vital creatures *in finitum*, whose divinely arranged interconnections form an intricate unity. He parts company with her when he also insists that each creature is itself a substance or monad that expresses the entirety of the perfectly harmonized world and does so from its own unique perspective. In fact, Leibniz’s famous doctrine of preestablished harmony results from a commitment to a plenitude of created substances along with a creative rendering of emanation, unity, and enhancement.²³

Ecumenical Rationalism

Like Conway, Leibniz embraces ecumenical rationalism. He believes that Christianity is not required to arrive at the most profound divine knowledge. While he thinks that contemplating the suffering and nature of Christ makes it easier to do this, one can know the basic truths about God without knowing anything about Christianity.²⁴

In the preface to his *Theodicy* of 1710, Leibniz makes several claims relevant to our topic. He is clear that one of the main goals of religion is to effect virtue. The aim of religion is:

to withdraw us from any approach to vice, to inure us to the good and to make us familiar with virtue. That was the aim of Moses and of other good lawgivers, of the wise men who founded

ejusdem universi, ejusdemque causae universalis, nempe Dei; sed variant perfectione expressionis ut ejusdem oppidi diversae repraesentationes vel scenographiae ex diversis punctis visus.” (A VI iv [B] 1646; emphasis in text).

²² See A VI i 532-51. For a fuller account of these views, see Mercer 2001, 146-9, 324-5.

²³ Mercer 2001, chapters 7-10; Rutherford 1995 passim.

²⁴ Leibniz’s views about the role of Christianity in the pursuit of divine knowledge changed over the years. In this discussion, the focus will be on his later views, especially on those of the *Theodicy* of 1710.

religious orders, and above all of Jesus Christ, divine founder of the purest and most enlightened religion.²⁵

He further insists that although Christianity is only one among several enlightened religions, it is the “purest and *most* enlightened” and the one founded by a “divine” personage. So, he takes Christ to be divine, but does not deny that other religions are enlightened, suggesting that “the divine light (*lumiere divine*)” is there to be glimpsed by anyone, of whatever religion. Because the human intellect is naturally poised to discover “beautiful conceptions” and “divine light,” all people have to do – whether Jew, Muslim, Christian, or other – is avoid the obscuring “opinions of men” and discern the “beautiful conceptions” related to “the greatness and goodness of God.” For example, about the doctrine of immortality, he explains: “it was not proclaimed for popular acceptance until Jesus Christ lifted the veil.” Although “Moses had already expressed the *beautiful* ideas of the greatness and the goodness of God ..., Jesus Christ developed fully the consequences of these conceptions, proclaiming that divine goodness and justice shine forth to perfection in God’s designs for the souls of men.”²⁶ The *Theodicy* is ecumenically radical: “there are countless paths open to God, giving him means of satisfying his justice and his goodness” (*Theodicy* § 9). In the end, all human beings are capable of grasping what I am calling here divine knowledge.

*Leibniz’s Suffering: Moral and Cognitive Benefits*²⁷

Leibniz agrees with Conway that there are moral and cognitive benefits to suffering. Unlike Conway, however, he does not think that such benefits come from

²⁵ “[...] pour nous éloigner des approches du vice, nous accoutumer au bien, et pour nous rendre la vertu familière. C’étoit le but de Moïse, & d’autres bons Législateurs, des sages Fondateurs des Ordres Religieux, & sur-tout de Jesus-Christ, divin Fondateur de la Religion la plus pure & la plus éclairée.”

²⁶ “[...] mais elle n’étoit point autorisée d’une manière populaire, jusqu’à ce que Jesus Christ leva le voile [...] Moïse avoit déjà donné les belles idées de la grandeur & de la bonté de Dieu [...] mais Jesus Christ en établissoit toutes les conséquences, et il faisoit voir que la bonté & la justice divine éclatent parfaitement dans ce que Dieu prépare aux âmes” (*Theodicy*, Preface).

²⁷ There are many excellent books on Leibniz’s philosophy, but it is striking how little work has been done on the cognitive benefits of suffering. For good introductions to his account of the problem of evil, which is related to the question about suffering in the world, see Rutherford, especially chapters 1-3 and Jolley 2005, chapter 6.

suffering itself. By itself, a passion can have no moral or cognitive benefit. Any benefit deriving from a passion must come from what is learned in the *transition* from a state of suffering to one of non-suffering. Such a transition can offer three kinds of benefits. The most basic benefit derived from such a transition is the pleasure of relief. In the *Theodicy*, he writes: “Evil often serves to make us savor good the more; sometimes too it contributes to a greater perfection in him who suffers.”²⁸ The movement from suffering to non-suffering leads to a greater appreciation of the second state.²⁹ The pleasure in it and the recognition of that pleasure is increased because of its concurrence with the previous state. In the *Theodicy*, he explains:

Use has ever been made of comparisons taken from the pleasures of the senses when these are mingled with that which borders on pain, to prove that there is something of like nature in intellectual pleasures. A little acid, sharpness or bitterness is often more pleasing than sugar; shadows enhance colors; and even dissonance in the right place gives relief to harmony. [...] Do men relish health enough, or thank God enough for it, without having been sick? And is it not most often necessary that a little evil render the good more discernible, that is to say, greater?³⁰

A second benefit produced by the transition from suffering to non-suffering occurs when there is a sense of “victory” over the passion. This happens when the sufferer has refused to give into the pain or the temptation of the passion: she sheds the moment of intense passion and feels strength in having done so. Leibniz suggests that moral benefits follow such small victories. One gains a sense of her strength and the inspiration to acquire more. He writes in the *Theodicy*: “it is well to observe that the vexations and pains attendant upon victory over the passions in some people turn into pleasure, through the great satisfaction they find in the lively sense of the force of their

²⁸ “La peine sert aussi pour l’amendement & pour l’exemple, & le mal sert souvent pour mieux goûter le bien, & quelquefois aussi il contribue à une plus grande perfection de celui qui le souffre” *Theodicy* (§ 23).

²⁹ It seems to have been fairly common for seventeenth-century philosophers to think that pleasure comes from control over one’s passions. See James 1997, 264.

³⁰ “On s’est servi de tout temps des comparaisons prises des plaisirs des sens, mêlés avec ce qui approche de la douleur, pour faire juger qu’il y a quelque chose de semblable dans les plaisirs intellectuels. Un peu d’acide, d’acre ou d’amer, plait souvent mieux que du sucre; les ombres rehaussent les couleurs; & meme une dissonance placée où il faut, donne du relief à l’harmonie. Nous voulons être effrayés par des danseurs de corde qui font sur le point de tomber, & nous voulons que les Tragedies nous fassent presque pleurer. Goute-t-on assez la santé, & en rend-on assez graces à Dieu, sans avoir jamais été malade? En ne faut-il pas le plus souvent qu’un peu de mal rende le bien plus sensible, c’est-à-dire plus grand?” *Theodicy* (§ 12).

mind.”³¹ When someone has mustered the “force of mind” to overcome the passions, she has taken a step toward moral improvement. The improvement is encouraged by the pleasure derived from the transition and the awareness of its source or “the force” in one’s mind. So, unlike Conway, Leibniz does not think that suffering is by itself sufficient for moral improvement. But he does think suffering is both necessary and sufficient for some sorts of moral improvement. An awareness of the increased pleasure and personal power that comes from victory over passions will not occur without them.

Given our concerns, the most significant benefit derived from the suffering-to-non-suffering transition is an understanding of the justice and beauty of God’s world. To be perfectly clear: without suffering, there cannot be a transition from suffering to non-suffering and, without the transition, there will not be a proper awareness of the harmony of God’s world. Therefore, suffering is a necessary condition for such understanding. The *Theodicy* claims that all human beings – regardless of religion – can find a path to God. They can do so because they all suffer and therefore all have the opportunity to learn about the justice and harmony of God’s world. As one moves from a state of suffering to non-suffering, she not only feels the pleasure of the non-suffering more than she otherwise would, she is also motivated to reflect on the order and justice of the whole. Such reflection is the first step toward glimpsing its profound harmony and beauty.

In *Leibniz’s Metaphysics: Its Origins and Development*, I argue that Leibniz developed a version of preestablished harmony twenty years before the *Discours de metaphysique* of 1686. At the very time he is constructing his account of worldly harmony, he is also concerned to explore the role of suffering in that world. During the years 1670-71, he often notes that human afflictions help them grasp divine harmony. He discusses the role of human suffering in general, and wonders about the cognitive and emotional distress that comes from confusion about the world and its true nature. He contrasts the pain of this confusion to the joy of cognitive success. When such pain is followed by some small insight into the harmony of God’s world, it becomes “delightful” and leads to “admiration” of God. A “dissonant beat” can lead us to recognize the

³¹ “Il est bon cependant de remarquer, que les chagrins & les peines qui accompagnent la victoire sur les passions, tournent en quelques-uns en plaisir, par le grand contentement qu’ils trouvent dans le sentiment vif de la force de leur esprit [...]”. (*Theodicy* § 329).

“wondrous” interconnections among things so that we are led to “the ruler who embraces the infinite.”³² In a striking passage from 1671 (when he is first developing the metaphor of mind as a mirror), he writes:

Thus, if there are many mirrors, that is, many minds recognizing our goods, there will be a greater light, the mirrors blending the light not only in the [individual] eye but also among each other. The gathered splendor produces glory. This is part of the reason for the deformity in mind: otherwise there would be nothing in the shadow to be magnified through the reflection of the mirrors (A VI i 464).

Like Conway, Leibniz believes that the improvement of one creature increases the goodness of the world. Consistent with sympathetic harmony and the enhancement relation, one mirror adds to the light and insight of all the others. It follows that as one creature benefits from the suffering-to-non-suffering transition, so do all the others. The cognitive benefit of suffering, therefore, is profound: the movement from suffering or confusion to pleasure or insight increases the chance for divine knowledge and insight into universal harmony. The use of the enhancement relationship is dramatic. Although minds are deformed, they can be made better through their sympathetic mirroring of one another. God has made the world so that each mind can help to lead the others out of shadow. The mirroring of minds allows them to see an “unexpected” unity “where no one would suspect a connection” (A VI i 484). As he makes the point a few years later: “The most confused discord fits into the order of the most exquisite harmony unexpectedly, as a painting is set off by shadow, as the harmony due to dissonances transforms the dissonances into consonance” (A VI iii 126). The world is better because apparent disorder will “unexpectedly” reveal “the wonderful reason” behind this “greatest” of symmetries (A VI iii 122).

The artworks of section 1 help highlight Leibniz’s underlying point. The *Roettgen Pietà* represents Mary at the most profound moment of her suffering (figure 3). Her pain is that of a particular moment in time. In its grip, there is no cognitive benefit. But when this moment has passed, as it has done for Mary in the *La Pietà de Villeneuve-lès-Avignon* (figure 4), it is possible to appreciate the transition from suffering to non-suffering and, more importantly, the *place* of the previous passion in the order of things.

³² A V i 485. For similar early views, see A VI i 466, 479.

The signs of Christ's wounds are still evident: the passion and pain are recent. But she has moved beyond them to a state of rational contemplation of their place in God's world. This Madonna, like Michelangelo's (figure 6), willingly accepts the overarching harmony and beauty of the world. Like John the Baptist in the *Isenheim Altarpiece*, the Mary of these later works sees the justice and order of the world in which her son suffered so profoundly.

Leibniz endorses the overall account given of these artworks. He explains in the *Theodicy*:

And it is not to be doubted that this faith and this confidence in God who gives us insight into his infinite goodness and prepares us for his love, in spite of the appearances of harshness that may repel us, are an admirable exercise for the virtues of Christian theology.³³

Because God's world is perfectly just and beautiful, the transition from suffering to non-suffering offers insight into its nature. Like John the Baptist, one can see the order in things and be delighted: "we *should see*, and should not *believe* only, that what God has done is the best" (*Theodicy* § 44). According to Leibniz, God has created the world to make this easy. Even in our confusion and pain, all we have to do is contemplate the order of things:

But therein we confess our ignorance of the facts, and we acknowledge, moreover, before we see it, that God does all the best possible, in accordance with the infinite wisdom which guides his actions. It is true that we have already before our eyes proofs and tests of this, when we see something entire, some whole complete in itself, and isolated, so to speak, among the works of God [...]. We cannot wonder enough at the beauty and the contrivance of its structure.³⁴

In the same way that the aesthetic pleasure of a symphony depends on the experience of the transitions and order among its parts, so the comprehension of the justice and beauty of God's world depends on the experience of its transitions: "Order, proportions, harmony *delight* us; painting and music are samples of these: God is all order; he always

³³ "Et il ne faut point douter que cette Foi & cette confiance en Dieu, qui nous fait envisager sa bonté infinie, & nous prépare à son amour, malgré les apparences de dureté qui nous peuvent rebutter, ne soient un exercice excellent des vertus de la Théologie Chrétienne". *Theodicy* (§45).

³⁴ "[...] mais c'est avouer notre ignorance sur les faits; c'est reconnoître cependant, avant que de voir, que Dieu fait tout, le mieux qu'il est possible, suivant la sagesse infinie qui règle ses actions. Il est vrai que nous en avons déjà des preuves & des essais devant nos yeux, lorsque nous voyons quelque chose d'entier, quelque tout accompli en soi, & isolé, pour ainsi dire, parmi les Ouvrages de Dieu. Un tel tout, formé, pour ainsi dire, de la main de Dieu, est une plante, un animal, un homme. Nous ne saurions assez admirer la beauté & l'artifice de sa structure". *Theodicy* (§ 134).

keeps truth of proportions, he makes universal harmony; all beauty is an effusion of his rays.”³⁵

Leibniz insists in the *Theodicy* that “there are countless paths open to God.” Regardless of one’s religion, that path is available to anyone who can see the harmony and beauty of things. Human beings are like Christ in that they all must suffer; and their suffering is like Christ’s in that it is done for the sake of the good. God has constructed the world so that human suffering has a cognitive payoff: the movement from suffering to non-suffering helps in the recognition of divine justice and in the acquisition of divine knowledge. He explains:

And when we succeed in respect of his justice, we shall likewise be impressed by his greatness and charmed by his goodness, which will show themselves through the clouds of a seeming reason that is deceived by outward appearances, in proportion as the mind is elevated by true reason to that which to us is invisible, but none the less sure.³⁶

5. Conclusion

Conway and Leibniz are ecumenical rationalists. Yet they believe that suffering contributes to moral development and assists in the acquisition of divine knowledge. The passions of Christ motivate them to see the benefits to suffering. For both of these rationalists, passions have cognitive benefits. Like Christ, human beings suffer in life and do so for the good of other creatures. Like John the Baptist in the *Isenheim Altarpiece*, Conway and Leibniz see suffering as part of the rational order of God’s world. Recognizing how passions fit into that order is the first step to important knowledge about God and creation. In the end, Conway and Leibniz ask us to meditate on the rational order of things while acknowledging its moments of pain.

³⁵ “L’ordre, les proportions, l’harmonie nous enchantent, la Peinture & la Musique en sont des échantillons; Dieu est tout ordre, il garde toujours la justesse des proportions, il fait l’harmonie universelle: toute la beauté est un épanchement de ses rayons” (*Theodicy*, Preface, 27).

³⁶ “Et quand on y réussira à l’égard de sa justice, on sera également frappé de sa grandeur & charmé de sa bonté, qui paroîtront à travers les nuages d’une Raison apparente, abusée par ce qu’elle voit, à mesure que l’esprit s’élèvera par la véritable Raison à ce qui nous est invisible, & n’en est pas moins certain”. *Theodicy* (§ 81).

Image Appendix:



Figure 1. Detail of Isenheim Altarpiece: Crucifixion by Matthias Grünewald, 1512-1513. (Musée d'Unterlinden, Colmar, France)



Figure 2. Isenheim Altarpiece: Resurrection by Matthias Grünewald, 1512-1513.
(Musée d'Unterlinden, Colmar, France)



Figure 3. Roettgen Pietà by Unknown, c. 1325. (Bonn, Germany)



Figure 4. La Pietà de Villeneuve-lès-Avignon by Enguerrand Quarton, c. 1455.
(Louvre Museum, Paris)



Figure 5. *Pietà con i Santi Giovanni Evangelista, Maria Maddalena, Nicodemo e Giuseppe d'Arimatea* by Pietro Perugino, 1490. (Uffizi Gallery, Milan)



Figure 6. Pietà by Michelangelo Buonarroti, c. 1500. (St. Peter's Basilica, Vatican City).

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