

## 6 ∞ Being and Being Grounded

### I. THE AGE OF LEIBNIZ

The world today stands under the spell of Leibniz's thought. Or, perhaps more carefully, we might say that the world today stands under the spell of what Leibniz thought only too well. With uncanny perceptiveness, he managed to articulate a basic principle of thinking and being in the early modern world that is arguably as vital today as it was at the outset of the eighteenth century. Looking for reasons, causes, and grounds of things was, to be sure, hardly novel then; indeed, it was second nature for human beings long before Leibniz's day. Yet Leibniz possessed the philosopher's gift of articulating and thereby giving wings to the principle under which humanity, particularly in the modern age, labors with an ever-mounting sense of urgency. The mantra of his genius has, indeed, become the mantra of an age fully committed to the promise of science and technology. I am referring, of course, to what has been called, since Leibniz's time, the principle of sufficient reason.

Many of the foregoing sentiments were voiced by Heidegger in lectures and an address held some fifty years ago and published in 1957 as *Der Satz vom Grund*, the German abbreviation for Leibniz's principle of reason.<sup>1</sup> According to Heidegger, only by looking back at what Leibniz was thinking when he elaborated the principle of sufficient reason can we understand our present age. "The thinking of Leibniz," he contends, not only prefigures mathematical logic and the subjectivity of German

1. M. Heidegger, *Der Satz vom Grund* (Pfullingen: Neske, 1957), 51 (hereafter "SvG 51"). All translations into English are my own.

idealism; it also “bears and stamps the chief tendency of what we can name the metaphysics of the modern age, thought broadly enough” (SvG 65). Thus, Heidegger insists that the name “Leibniz” by no means stands for some by-gone system of philosophy. In today’s seemingly unrestricted “technological-scientific construction of the world,” he contends, the principle of sufficient reason first comes fully into its own. In terminology perhaps more familiar a half-century ago, Heidegger emphasizes how the self-proclaimed “atomic age” adapts human thinking to modern technology and underwrites computational thinking to give “scientific thinking an axiomatic form.” Modernity in this sense is only beginning, Heidegger submits, and modernity is the age of Leibniz, the age in which the principle of sufficient reason is the supreme principle (SvG 40f, 65f).

Heidegger gives mixed signals about this development. Sometimes he tells his students that this modern development is both necessary and promising, as is retracing the path through it (SvG 41f, 66). More often he makes it clear that he regards the unrestricted pursuit of reasons and grounds (*Grund*) as a threat, a threat to another sort of ground (*Boden*), the soil that is allegedly vital to human flourishing. The fact that Heidegger continues to employ the term *Boden* in a way that reverberates with its checkered past use (by him and others) in National Socialist rhetoric is hardly accidental. It remains to be seen whether it can have a redeeming significance that is not parasitic on a parasite.

Nevertheless, if we can manage to bracket these important political ramifications of his rhetoric for the moment, we can readily appreciate the experience motivating his lament about modernity, captivated by the principle of sufficient reason. As he puts it, the more doggedly we pursue the grounds and reasons for things, the more uprooted we seem to be; the more we penetrate the causes of things in the sciences, the more that vital ground (*Boden*) recedes from view (SvG 60; SvG 137f). Heidegger also bemoans the fact that though modern science—and thereby modern technology and the modern university as well—are beholden to this principle, consideration of it is not to be found in the sciences themselves or, for that matter, in the university (SvG 48f, 56f). In fact, Heidegger submits, given the way the sciences correspond to the demand contained in the principle of sufficient reason, they are unable to reflect on it (SvG 59). But it is not only “the usual scientific-technical way of presenting things” that fails here; the philosophical doctrine that the principle

of sufficient reason is an immediately illuminating principle “evades the decisive questions of thinking” (SvG 66). Not surprisingly, when Heidegger infamously remarks that science does not think, he is quick to add that neither does philosophy.

Accordingly, Heidegger’s own strategy for dealing with the principle of sufficient reason is not to discard it. Instead he pleads for distinguishing two basic ways of reading the principle. On the standard, Leibnizian reading, the principle of sufficient reason is a statement about beings or whatever is; on the reading proposed by Heidegger, it is a way of saying what it means to be. Heidegger makes the case for this reading by contending that certain aspects of being are allegedly irreducible to and, indeed, occluded by Leibniz’s account of the principle of sufficient reason, not least the utter self-sameness and individuality, the historicity and non-dependence of being. Thus, Heidegger’s central contention is that we become oblivious to being to the extent that, taking our bearings from the principle as Leibniz conceives it, we engage in a wholesale pursuit of rational explanation, giving full sway to the standpoint of reason (SvG 181). Paradoxically, thanks to pursuit of the sufficient reason of beings, we are said to lose sight of being as—in some sense—the ground of or reason for beings.

I think that there is something right about this contention. However, as I hope to show by means of the following considerations, the issue is far more complicated than Heidegger lets on. In particular, his way of painting Leibniz’s principle with the same colors that he applies to the so-called “atomic age” is, I argue, misleading to a fault. But the main thrust of my following remarks is to establish what is wrong with Heidegger’s interpretation of Leibniz’s principle of sufficient reason as a means of clarifying what I take to be right about it.

My comments are divided into three parts. In the first part I discuss Leibniz’s complex account of the principle of sufficient reason with an eye to its bearing on his conception of the contingency of finite existence. In the second part I turn to Heidegger’s account of Leibniz’s principle of sufficient reason and his “argument” for a different, nonconventional reading of the principle.<sup>2</sup> In the third part I address the trenchancy of the argument.

2. In order to keep the discussion from becoming unwieldy, I omit two important, related themes of Heidegger’s account, namely, his treatment of language and his treatment of transla-

II. LEIBNIZ ON THE NATURE AND SCOPE OF THE  
PRINCIPLE OF SUFFICIENT REASON

One of Leibniz's early (if not earliest) formulations of the principle is the abbreviated version: "nothing is without reason" (*nihil est sine ratione*) from around 1671.<sup>3</sup> Writing to a student of Spinoza in 1677, Leibniz adds the crucial qualification that the reason be sufficient: "nothing exists for which a sufficient reason of its existence cannot be given."<sup>4</sup> 'Sufficient' in this context does not mean what it typically means today in talk of sufficient conditions, as when, for example, a condition is said to be sufficient to identify membership in a class. When Leibniz speaks of a sufficient reason, he has in mind the complete satisfaction of all the conditions requisite for something to be. As he himself puts it: "For existence it is necessary that the aggregate of all that is requisite also exist [*adesse*]. Something is requisite if a thing cannot exist without it; the aggregate of all that is requisite is the full cause of the thing. Nothing is without a reason. For nothing is without the aggregate of all that is requisite."<sup>5</sup> A decade or more later (in the 1680s) in an essay entitled "A specimen of discoveries," Leibniz adds yet another qualification, by stipulating that the reason must be given, that is, *principium reddendae rationis*. In this same connection, he writes that for every truth, the *ratio* can be given (*quod omnis veritatis reddi ratio potest*) or, as is commonly if less precisely said, "nothing comes to pass without a cause" (*vel ut vulgo ajunt, quod nihil fit sine causa*). This principle and the principle of contradiction are, he asserts, the principles of all rational operations (*ratiocinationum*).<sup>6</sup> Finally, in the *Monadology* (§32) he combines the two already-mentioned qualifi-

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tion, particularly, as it bears upon the differences among the terms *logos*, *ratio*, *Vernunft*, and *Grund* that historically underlie precursors and variations on the principle.

3. *Opuscles et fragments inédits de Leibniz*, ed. Louis Couturat (Paris: Alcan, 1903), p. 515; *Die philosophischen Schriften von Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz*, ed. G. I. Gerhardt (Hildesheim: Olms, 1965), Band IV, 232.

4. *Die philosophischen Schriften* IV, 138.

5. Leibniz, *Textes inédits d'après les manuscrits de la bibliothèque provinciale de Hanovre*, ed. G. Grua, 2 vols. (Paris: Presses universitaires de France, 1948), 267: "Ad existentiam necesse est aggregatum omnium adesse requisitorum. Requisitum est id sine quo res esse non potest, aggregatum omnium requisitorum est causa plena rei. Nihil est sine ratione. Quia nihil est sine aggregato omnium requisitorum." See, too, *Die philosophischen Schriften* VII, 310. Heidegger gives a clear interpretation of the sufficient reason along these lines; see SvG 64.

6. *Die philosophischen Schriften* VII, 309.

cations into the formulation *principium reddendae rationis sufficientis* or “the principle of the sufficient reason that is to be given.”<sup>7</sup>

Leibniz puts the principle of sufficient reason to many uses. It underlies his arguments for the relativity of time, the identity of indiscernibles, and the existence of God. Thus, there would not be a sufficient reason to create the world at one time or another if time were absolute;<sup>8</sup> nor would there be a sufficient reason for the different placement of two things if they differed only in number;<sup>9</sup> God exists since otherwise there would not be a sufficient reason why this world rather than another exists.<sup>10</sup> The principle of sufficient reason also plays a fundamental role in establishing the nonexistence of relations and the nature of monads as well as their pre-established harmony and immortality. As these examples indicate, for Leibniz the existence of something stands or falls in some important sense with the presence or absence of a sufficient reason for it. There is a pattern to these arguments, a pattern of disarming simplicity and enormous consequence: either something exists or it does not; if it exists, then there is a sufficient reason for it; if there is no sufficient reason for it, then it does not exist. Why is there something rather than nothing? For Leibniz, there is something rather than nothing because nothing can exist without a sufficient reason for doing so, although nothing in nature contains within itself the sufficient reason for its being. In this sense the principle of sufficient reason is an ontological principle, articulating what it means for something to be at all. It is not enough to be a bounded variable; to be is to have an adequate reason for being. In the first step in a proof of God’s existence, Leibniz asserts that “*reason [ratio]* is why in nature something exists rather than nothing.” He immediately

7. The story does not by any means end here; there are competitors to the principle of sufficient reason in later writings, namely, the principle of perfection (*Textes inédits*, 287) and experience; on this matter and on the role of “experimenta” as principles of knowledge countenanced by Leibniz after 1679, see R. C. Sleigh, Jr., “Leibniz on the Two Great Principles of All Our Reasonings,” in *Essays on Early Modern Philosophers*, ed. Vere Chappell, Volume 12: Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz (New York–London: Garland, 1992), Part II, 305f.; see, too, Leibniz, *Sämtliche Schriften und Briefe*, ed. German Academy of Sciences (Darmstadt: Reichl, 1930), sechste Reihe, Band 6, S. 4.

8. *Die philosophischen Schriften* II, 515.

9. *Opuscules et fragments*, 519.

10. *Die philosophischen Schriften* VI, 603; VII, 289ff., 356; for additional examples, see Benson Mates, *The Philosophy of Leibniz: Metaphysics and Language* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1986), 155f.

adds that this claim follows from the principle that nothing comes to be without reason.<sup>11</sup>

While Leibniz seems to think that the principle of sufficient reason, together with the principle of contradiction, holds for all true propositions, he distinguishes the scope of what depends upon it from the scope of what depends upon the principle of contradiction. Thus, in *The Principles of Nature and Grace* as well as in the correspondence with Clarke two decades later, he regards the principle of sufficient reason as the foundation of metaphysics, natural theology, and physics. Mathematics rests, by contrast, upon the principle of contradiction.<sup>12</sup> So, too, in *Cum animadvertem* (1679) as well as much later in the *Théodicée*, the principle of sufficient reason is said to encompass all contingent propositions, in contrast to necessary propositions, which fall under the principle of contradiction.

However, there is an important qualification made, even a shift, some scholars (notably, Robert Sleigh) would argue, in Leibniz's thinking about the nature of the principle of sufficient reason that occurs during the 1680s, as he distinguishes necessary truths from contingent truths, explaining the difference between them as a difference between the finite and infinite analysis required to demonstrate them. He instructively likens the difference to one between commensurable and incommensurable numbers. As a result, Leibniz's considered view of the matter seems to be that if something is contingently the case, then there is a sufficient reason for it, but in the form not of an a priori proof but of a progressive convergence. Thus, in the *Generales Inquisitiones* he writes:

There can be relations which, however far an analysis is continued, will never reveal themselves sufficiently for certainty, and are seen perfectly only by Him whose intellect is infinite. It is true that as with asymptotes and incommensurables, so with contingent things we can see many things with certainty, from

11. *Die philosophischen Schriften* VII, 289: "(1) Ratio est in Natura, cur aliquid potius existat quam nihil. Id consequens est magni illius principii, quod nihil fiat sine ratione, quemadmodum etiam cur hoc potius existat quam aliud rationem esse oportet. (2) Ea ratio debet esse in aliquo Ente Reali seu causa. Nihil aliud enim causa est, quam realis ratio, neque veritates possibilitatum et necessitatum (seu negatarum in opposito possibilitatum) aliquid efficerent nisi possibilitates fundarentur in re actu existente. (3) Hoc autem Ens oportet necessarium esse, alioqui causa rursus extra ipsum quaerenda esset cur ipsum existat potius quam non existat, contra Hypothesin. Est scilicet Ens illud ultima ratio Rerum, et uno vocabulo solet appellari DEUS."

12. *Die philosophischen Schriften* VI, 603; VII, 355f.

the very principle that every truth must be capable of proof. . . . But we can no more give the full reason for contingent things than we can constantly follow asymptotes and run through infinite progressions of numbers.<sup>13</sup>

Similarly, in remarks entitled (by Grua) "On contingency" he introduces experience as a means of knowing not only contingent things but the principle of sufficient reason itself:

Since we cannot know the true formal reason for existence in any particular case because it involves a progression to infinity, it is therefore sufficient for us to know the truth of contingent things a posteriori, that is, through experience, and yet, at the same time, to hold, universally or in general, that principle divinely implanted in our mind, confirmed both by reason and experience itself (to the extent that we can penetrate things), that nothing happens without a reason, as well as the principle of opposites, that that which has the more reason always happens.<sup>14</sup>

This passage is striking, since it expresses clearly the fact that Leibniz continues to accord the principle of sufficient reason an unrestricted provenance (at least for finite minds), despite his acknowledgment of the infinite analysis (or synthesis, as the case may be) required *per impossibile* in the case of contingencies.<sup>15</sup> This differentiation of the sorts of sufficient reason that can be given coincides with a more precise conception of logical or a priori necessity. Logical necessity requires demonstrability, that is, complete analysis of the concepts contained in a proposition (and not merely consideration of the relations holding between those concepts).<sup>16</sup>

This dual understanding of the principle of sufficient reason, applying diversely to the necessary and to the contingent, has a bearing on Leibniz's compatibilism. By his lights, the universal sweep of the principle is not inconsistent with divine freedom and the contingency of the world.<sup>17</sup> He is able to hold this position because the sufficient reason for

13. *Opuscules et fragments* 388–89; see, too, Leibniz, *Nouvelles Lettres et Opuscules inédits de Leibniz*, ed. Foucher de Careil (Paris: Durand, 1857), 182; Sleigh has listed the texts in which the thesis of infinite analysis is advanced; see Robert Sleigh, "Truth and Sufficient Reason in the Philosophy of Leibniz," in Chappell, *Essays on Early Modern Philosophers*, vol. 12/part II, 271, 279 n. 2, and 283, n. 38.

14. *Textes inédits*, 304f.; see, too, *ibid.*, 343, and *Opuscules et fragments*, 19.

15. Ian Hacking, "Infinite Analysis," *Studia Leibnitiana* 4 (1974): 127f.

16. Robert Merrihew Adams, "Leibniz's Theories of Contingency," in Chappell, *Essays on Early Modern Philosophers*, vol. 12/part I, 18.

17. *Essai de Théodicée*, Sections 288–302 (*Die philosophischen Schriften* VI, 288–96); in a

contingent existence—in contrast to mere possibility and necessary existence—can reside only in something other than that existence itself. Whereas the status of mere possibility and necessary existence can be explained solely by appeal to the principle of noncontradiction, the principle of sufficient reason is the key to explaining possibilities that exist but not in virtue of themselves. Thus, Leibniz characterizes the actual, contingent world as something necessary on the supposition of something else (*necessarius ex alterius hypothesi*) and distinguishes it both from what enjoys the status of simply being possible (by reason of being noncontradictory) and from what is necessary of itself or, as he puts it in the manuscript entitled *The Philosopher's Confession*, “what has within itself the reason for its existence and truth.”<sup>18</sup> What alone suffices to explain contingent existence is God. However, importantly and more precisely, it is not God’s existence as something necessary through itself but God’s own free choice to actualize this world that is the sufficient reason for contingent, individual existence. In other words, there is a contingency to the existence not only of the actual world but of the act of its creation. A contingency compatible with the principle of sufficient reason runs deeply through actual beings in Leibniz’s conception of them.

Not everyone accepts this aspect of Leibniz’s argument that he has a place for contingency. Since God cannot choose anything but the best possible world, a defense of contingency resting on the idea of such a choice might seem to give way to a system as necessitarian as Spinoza’s. But this inference, whatever its merits otherwise, must discount Leibniz’s contention that God’s choice is morally, but not metaphysically necessary. Whereas metaphysical necessity “leaves no place for any choice, presenting only one possible object,” the moral necessity obliging the wisest to choose the best is necessary only in an analogous sense, since it does not eliminate other, contrary possibilities.<sup>19</sup>

By itself, this solution is not very satisfying, since it leaves open the

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1671 letter Leibniz seems to require only voluntariness and intelligence for freedom; for a discussion, see Adams, “Leibniz’s Theories of Contingency,” 3f.

18. Leibniz, *Confessio Philosophi*, ed. Otto Saame (Frankfurt am Main: Klostermann, 1967), 66; see, too, *Textes inédits*, 273; on noncontradictoriness as equivalent to possibility, even if its coexistence with God implies a contradiction “in some way or other [*aliquo modo*],” see *Textes inédits*, 289f.; *Essai de Théodicée*, Section 173 (*Die philosophischen Schriften* VI, 217).

19. *Essai de Théodicée*, Sections 236 and 367 (*Die philosophischen Schriften* VI, 258 and 333).

question of the relation between moral and metaphysical necessities. Moreover, there is strong evidence that, as Robert Adams has argued, Leibniz himself vacillated considerably on the issue of whether God's choice of the best is necessary or contingent. Thus, while passages from the *Théodicée* and elsewhere stress the contingency of the choice, there are other passages, most notably from 1706, where Leibniz emphasizes the logical necessity of God's choice.<sup>20</sup>

Yet even if it is necessary in some sense—logical as well as moral—that God choose the most worthy of possible worlds, Leibniz insists in his later writings that it is not a matter of necessity that this world enjoys that status. This point deserves particular emphasis since it further underscores the contingency of this world in relation to divine causation. Leibniz says quite plainly that, while it is true that the world of God's making is the most worthy, its being the most worthy “is not a necessary truth; it is indemonstrable, contingent, a truth of fact.”<sup>21</sup>

So the contingency of this world lies for Leibniz in (a) the fact that it is not necessary of itself, (b) the fact that its existence is the result of a choice (tabling the issue of whether the choice is only morally necessitated), and (c) the fact that the superiority of this world over others is indemonstrable and, indeed, indemonstrable because of the infinite aspects of the world. At the same time, this contingency is, like that of the world's existence at all, fully compatible with the universal if qualified reach of the principle of sufficient reason with respect to nature. Reconstructing what all this means is notoriously difficult, to be sure, but it should be clear that it does not mean that one world is superior to all the others because God thinks or knows as much. What qualifies this world to be the actual world is a contingent truth that God immediately recognizes.

20. Adams, “Leibniz's Theories of Contingency,” 24: “There seems to have been more vacillation and uncertainty in Leibniz's mind about whether it is necessary or contingent that God chooses what is best than about any other main issue in the problem of contingency. I shall argue, however, that the view that it is necessary is required by other features of Leibniz's philosophy.” Adams has in mind here the question of logical or metaphysical necessity. He observes, however, that if the *Essai de Théodicée* and, suitably interpreted, section 13 of the *Discourse on Metaphysics* were our only sources, we would have to conclude that Leibniz considers God's choice of what is best to be contingent, but in other texts Leibniz seems to hold the opposite; see Adams, 25f.

21. *Textes inédits*, 493, probably dating from 1706; as Robert Adams notes, the thesis of the contingency of the property of being best has met with resistance among scholars; see Adams, “Leibniz's Theories of Contingency,” 15.

There remain problems with this account, not least Leibniz's contention that God is the source of what is real in the possible worlds. Yet, however such problems are to be resolved, the dependency of possible worlds on God by no means rules out their contingency in more than one sense of the term, and that contingency is something that Leibniz seems clearly to have underscored. For the purposes of this paper, what is important is that Heidegger overlooks this contingency and its compatibility with the universal existential scope of the principle of sufficient reason. It is important because, by underscoring this contingency, Leibnizian rationality presents a particular challenge to Heidegger's contention that we can think what it means to be only by taking leave of that sort of rationality.

### III. HEIDEGGER ON READING THE PRINCIPLE OF SUFFICIENT REASON

There is much more to be said about Leibniz's principle of sufficient reason and, especially, there are notable complications to be addressed. Yet the foregoing perhaps suffices to explain why Couturat in his *La logique de Leibniz* (1903) was able to convince Russell that the entire *Monadology* and, indeed, Leibniz's entire metaphysics derives from the principle of sufficient reason.<sup>22</sup> The priority accorded the logic in Leibniz's thinking has been a matter of contention, to be sure. Ernst Cassirer and A. H. Johnson have emphasized the influence that Leibniz's studies of nature and the mind (among other things) exercised on his metaphysics.<sup>23</sup> A case can also be made that Leibniz in the 1680s argues for the principle on the basis of certain metaphysical assumptions. But, whatever the motivations for the principle, there is general agreement that for Leibniz, to be is to have a reason or ground for being.

Heidegger seems to have had his own take on these issues. A former

22. Louis Couturat, *La logique de Leibniz d'après des documents inédits* (Paris: Alcan, 1901); Bertrand Russell, *A Critical Exposition of the Philosophy of Leibniz*, second edition (London: George Allen & Unwin, 1937), preface to the second edition, v–vi.

23. Ernst Cassirer, *Leibniz' System in seinen wissenschaftlichen Grundlagen* (1. Auflage, Marburg an der Lahn: Elwert, 1902; reprint: Hildesheim: Olms, 1962), 532–48; A. H. Johnson, "Leibniz's Method and the Basis of his Metaphysics," in *Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz: Critical Assessments*, ed. R. S. Woodhouse, Volume 1: *Metaphysics and Its Foundations. 1: Sufficient Reason, Truth, and Necessity* (London/New York: Routledge, 1994), 24ff.

student of Husserl, Heinrich Ropohl, had completed a dissertation on Leibniz under Heidegger's direction, defending it in June 1932. In Heidegger's positive evaluation of the defense, he writes that Ropohl's dissertation shows in a new way "that the Leibnizian metaphysics is not built up on 'the logic' but instead the *reverse*." However, Heidegger completes the sentence by adding, "supposing that it makes any sense at all to divide up the original whole of the Leibnizian philosophy in these terms."<sup>24</sup> The implication is that Leibniz's views on the principle of sufficient reason are best understood as expressing an equivalence or parallel between metaphysics and logic.

Heidegger's approach here also explains his indulgent attitude toward what is often regarded as Leibniz's reduction of causes to the principle of sufficient reason. Though Heidegger notes the standard criticism that Leibniz mistakenly equates reasons and causes, he interprets Leibniz generously on this score, suggesting that the principle of causation is one form of the principle of sufficient reason, as Leibniz himself sometimes suggests.<sup>25</sup> The significance of the principle of sufficient reason, at least in Heidegger's interpretation of Leibniz, reaches across any divide between reasons and causes as it does between logic and metaphysics.

Nonetheless, across that logical/metaphysical divide, Heidegger does take exception to one interpretation of the principle of sufficient reason that he traces back to Leibniz. In keeping with the phenomenological tradition's dogged refusal to accept supposedly self-evident views without scrutiny, Heidegger does not regard the principle of sufficient reason as something beyond question. He accordingly endeavors to explain the hold of the principle of sufficient reason on us or, in other words, why it seems so self-evident.

24. Renato Cristin and Kiyoshi Sakai, eds., *Phänomenologie und Leibniz* (Freiburg/München: Alber, 2000), 294; Heinrich Ropohl, *Das Eine und die Welt. Versuch zur Interpretation der Leibnizischen Metaphysik* (Leipzig: Hirzel, 1936).

25. Heidegger notes the usual criticism that Leibniz mistakenly equates reasons and causes (see SvG 43ff., 52; Mates, *The Philosophy of Leibniz*, 158–62) but, cautioning against the presumption, he suggests that the principle of causation is one form of the principle of sufficient reason. For a set of texts that corroborate Heidegger's more generous reading, see Mates n. 34 on pp. 158f.

1. *Empowerment: Explaining the Hold of the Principle of Sufficient reason on Modernity*

On the standard reading of the principle of sufficient reason, it is a principle governing every being. It stipulates, moreover, not only that every being insofar as it exists has a ground or reason, but also that the ground or reason needs to be given and, indeed, literally “given back.” Thus, it is the *principium reddendae rationis*: for every being insofar as it exists, the reason must be adduced, retrieved, or, again, literally “given back.”<sup>26</sup> But why given back and to whom? This stipulation, Heidegger contends, implicates the standard reading of the principle in modernity’s project of absolutizing subjectivity, since it is precisely the knowing subject to whom the ground or reason is supposed to be given.<sup>27</sup> “The ground or reason is such as must be supplied to the person who entertains and thinks [things]” and, indeed, does so with a view to knowing them (SvG 47). Heidegger maintains that the sort of knowing in question here for Leibniz is scientific and the ground or reason to be given is that of a true sentence or assertion in the context of proof or justification. Glossing this character of the principle of sufficient reason, Heidegger observes: “The enormous power of the principle consists in the fact that it pervades, guides, and carries all knowing that expresses itself in sentences” (SvG 46).

This last remark may seem to imply that the principle of sufficient reason is essentially epistemological. Heidegger is particularly adamant, however, that such a restricted understanding of the principle of sufficient reason is misguided. For modern thinking in general, he claims, being is equated with being an object, that is, objecthood, being presented or represented to a subject. The principle of sufficient reason simply asserts that this presenting and what is presented to it must be some-

26. *Die philosophischen Schriften* VII, 309; not a reason, as Mates suggests; Mates, *The Philosophy of Leibniz*, 155.

27. Noting the variations on *facere*, namely, *efficere*, *sufficere*, *perficere*, informing Leibniz’s views, something that, Heidegger observes, is “certainly no accident,” he links the principle of sufficient reason to the production of things (SvG 64). This linking deserves more attention, given Heidegger’s critique of the role that production plays in the Western metaphysical tradition; see his 1927 lecture course published as *Die Grundprobleme der Philosophie*, Gesamtausgabe Band 24, ed. Friedrich-Wilhelm von Herrmann (Frankfurt am Main: Klostermann, 1975), 140–65.

thing sufficiently grounded or justified (*begründet*). In this way the principle of sufficient reason holds of every object (what “is” in that sense). In other words, to be is identical to being an object and being an object is identical to being grounded. We can say with certainty that something exists only if it presents itself to us as grounded or, equivalently, if the ground is “delivered” or “conveyed” (*zugestellt*) as the ground.<sup>28</sup> As Heidegger puts it, “Something ‘is’, that is to say, it is pointed out as an entity, only if it is asserted in a sentence that satisfies the basic principle of the ground [sufficient reason] as the basic principle of justification” (SvG 47).

To the question of what grounds the principle of sufficient reason or, equivalently, why it is modernity’s supreme principle, Heidegger thus gives at least part of an answer. The principle of sufficient reason enjoys this status precisely because of what is packed into that gerund “*reddendae*,” which he translates as *zustellen*, meaning “to deliver” as in delivering the mail, a warning, a bill, etc. Though the gerundive expression “*reddendae*” is open, to be sure, to different interpretations (which are signaled, for example, by the variants on “should” or “must”), it does suppose, as Heidegger rightly sees, someone to whom the sufficient reason is given back. But it is also clear that this emphasis on the subjectivity tacitly presupposed by the principle of sufficient reason can only be a finite subjectivity. This finite subjectivity is not to be confused with a contingent, individual subject; instead it is the sort of subjectivity, elaborated in modernity, that suffices for there to be objects (SvG 137). At the same time, in the context of Leibniz’s specific system, while a sufficient reason must be given to us why God creates this world, the sufficient reason was never absent from God such that it must or should be given back to Him—a point that Heidegger ignores.<sup>29</sup>

In any case Heidegger casts this answer, it bears stressing, completely in historical terms. In addition to being based upon Leibniz’s own historical wording of the principle, Heidegger elaborates its decisive impact

28. SvG 54ff. Or, to paraphrase yet another way that Heidegger puts it, only what exhibits itself to us as we entertain or represent it, only what we encounter in such a way that it is grounded, obtains as something that stands secure. “Only what stands in this way is the sort of thing of which we can say with certainty: it *is*” (SvG 54). Lost in the translation of this paraphrase is a wordplay on *sicher Stehendes* and *Gegenstand*.

29. One might ask whether it is meaningful to say that God has a sufficient reason since there is no sufficient reason why this world is better than the others (assuming that a sufficient reason entails an inference); or is this just a matter of semantics?

on subsequent philosophers and on contemporary thinking, as we noted at the outset. “The *reddendum*, the claim on the delivery of the ground or reason, has now interposed itself between the human being who thinks and his world, in order to take control [*sich bemächtigen*] of human consciousness [*Vorstellen*] in a new way” (SvG 48). What is typically complex in Heidegger’s account is this attempt to think what characterizes being-in-the-world in a way that does not fall back on a subject or a world. Accordingly, the powerfulness of the principle of sufficient reason—what exerts power (*machtet*) in it—cannot be reduced to what human subjects do or what the world does.<sup>30</sup> Nevertheless, its power is precisely its demand to deliver to the human subject the grounds or reasons of whatever is. “What exerts power in the principle of sufficient reason is the demand for the delivery of the ground or reason” (SvG 54).

Heidegger’s aim here, it bears recalling, is to try to explain why the principle of sufficient reason has the hold on our thinking that it does and, indeed, such that we find ourselves unable to question it. The key to Heidegger’s explanation is the “*reddendae*” stipulation, that is, the necessity of giving the reason back to a subject,<sup>31</sup> a stipulation that supposedly explains why the principle of sufficient reason is the defining principle of modernity and, indeed, is the defining principle as something explicitly demanded by modern subjectivity. It is in this connection that Heidegger makes the critical, tendentious observations, cited earlier, that contemporary sciences and philosophies generally do not question or even find any need to question the principle of sufficient reason even while supposing it. The explanation for this obliviousness, Heidegger submits, is the fact that the principle of sufficient reason is at once a principle of empowerment and a principle of being, historically conceived as the *vis viva* and the *Wille zur Macht*.<sup>32</sup> In the *reddendum* stipulation, he notes in

30. Crucial here is the relation obtaining between *Seyn* and *Da-sein*; a relation that Heidegger designates a “grounding” (*Gründung*), the event (*Ereignis*) of *Da-sein*’s appropriation by *Seyn*; see *Beiträge zur Philosophie (Vom Ereignis)*, Gesamtausgabe Band 65, ed. Friedrich-Wilhelm von Herrmann (Frankfurt am Main: Klostermann, 1989), 260f.

31. SvG 63: “In der ratio reddenda zeigt sich der Grund im Charakter des Anspruches auf Zustellung.” See, too, SvG 45, 54.

32. Heidegger traces Nietzsche’s thought back to its Leibnizian roots (via Schelling): “Das erste und zwar metaphysische Gespräch mit Leibniz hat Schelling eingeleitet, es erstreckt sich bis in Nietzsches Lehre vom Willen zur Macht” (SvG 43). Later in the lectures he identifies the conception of the being as the objecthood of things with the conception of being as will, though his discussion is abbreviated to a fault; see SvG 115.

the final hour of his lectures, “lies the aspect of the unconditioned and thoroughgoing claim to supplying the mathematically-technically computable grounds, the total ‘rationalization’” (SvG 173).

Heidegger’s rhetorical guile here is noteworthy. By asking why the principle of sufficient reason has the hold on us that it does, Heidegger has already moved beyond a consideration of the principle of sufficient reason as a principle of the relationship between beings to a consideration of it in terms of an historical manner and dispensation of being. He shifts the center of focus to the way that the principle of sufficient reason prevails or holds sway as a grounding condition of modern subjects and their world, irreducible to either. Thus, before formally and explicitly introducing his audience to the nonstandard reading of the principle of sufficient reason, Heidegger is already employing that reading.

## 2. *What the Principle of Sufficient Reason Presupposes:*

### *Being as a Groundless Ground*

In elaborating what the principle of sufficient reason says about being, Heidegger recounts two familiar themes: a sense in which being—and not being—here (*Da-sein*), not human beings, not subjectivity—is groundlessly grounding and a sense in which it grounds precisely by holding back.<sup>33</sup> Being is what dispenses itself to us precisely by concealing itself and, indeed, in more than one sense of the term. The fact that we do not observe the being of beings in any way analogous to the way we observe other properties of them is one sense in which being conceals itself. Yet it would be a mistake to suppose that, by identifying the presence of beings in contrast to their colors or sizes, we then have gotten hold of their being. It would be a mistake because an absence, for example, what is merely imminent or forever lost, can be no less integral than a presence to what it means for something to be. Being, as Heidegger is fond of saying in *Der Satz vom Grund* as elsewhere, speaks to us, exhorting and consoling, like a kind of clearing for which it and nothing else is respon-

33. SvG 109: “Wenn wir das Wort ‘Geschick’ vom Sein sagen, dann meinen wir, daß Sein . . . sich lichtet. . . .”; SvG 110: “Sein schickt sich uns zu, indem es zugleich sein Wesen entzieht, dieses im Entzug verbirgt”; SvG 118f.: “Im solchem Falle beginnen wir mit dem Versuch: Sein als Sein zu denken. Dies sagt: *Sein nicht mehr durch etwas Seiendes erklären.*” See, too, SvG 143: “Sein währt als sich entziehendes Zuschicken des Zeit-Spiel-Raumes für das Erscheinen dessen, was, dem Geschick und seinem Geheiß entsprechend, jeweils das Seiende heißt.” For other texts on the “Zeit-Spiel-Raum,” see SvG 129f., 146.

sible, a clearing that makes way for the play of time-space, an interplay of presences and absences in which beings are able to appear.<sup>34</sup> As Heidegger is quick to add in an attempt to forestall misconstruals of what he is saying, presence and absence, bestowal and withdrawal, are not properties of being as something that otherwise obtains, for example, like the changing color of someone's hair. "The self-concealing, the withdrawal, is a manner in which being as being endures, dispenses itself, that is to say, affords [*gewährt*] itself" (SvG 122). Heidegger here is maintaining the constancy of being in a way that supposedly does not collapse into the metaphysics of presence, since it is precisely the absence or withdrawal that characterizes the way being persists; so, too, he speaks of being as "wielding power" (*Machtende*)—the same terms he used to explain the principle of sufficient reason's hold on modernity—but precisely as the way being dispenses itself "in the manner of the withdrawal" (SvG 123).

Heidegger attempts to demonstrate what he means by this fate or dispensation of being in the form of a withdrawal by turning to ancient and modern approaches that supposedly signal this aspect of being. In this connection, he mentions Aristotle's strictures about proceeding from what is more apparent to us to what is more apparent by nature, that is, in its being (*Physics* 184a16ff.) and Heraclitus' observation that being loves to hide. Aristotle's methodology and Heraclitus' cryptic remark each evidence a Greek appreciation of how being's withdrawal or concealment of itself is essential to the way it dispenses and displays itself.<sup>35</sup>

In regard to modern philosophy, Heidegger emphasizes how a commitment to the principle of sufficient reason, rigorously construed, underlies Kant's critical philosophy. The *Kritik der reinen Vernunft* is the attempt, against the backdrop of an equation of subjectivity and rationality, to identify the sufficient reason for objects, "that is to say, for ob-

34. SvG 109; 129f. Moreover, while 'being' says something different in the various epochs of its dispensation, the way in which it epochally dispenses itself to us by withholding its essence, concealing this in the withdrawal, is "something the same" (SvG 110).

35. Heidegger contends that being's character of withdrawing is entailed by Aristotle's methodological considerations at the outset of the *Physics*: "Das Sein des von-sich-her-Aufgehenden und -Anwesenden heißt *physis*. . . . Der Weg dahin empfängt seinen eigenen Charakter aus der Weise, wie das Sein des Seienden für den erkennbaren Menschen offenbar ist. Nun zeigt sich überall leicht, daß uns das jeweilig Seiende . . . jederzeit offenkundig gegenüberliegt. Dagegen liegt das, wohindurch all dieses von-sich-her Anwesende auf seine Weise anweist und aufgeht, uns niemals gegenüber wie das hier und dort jeweils Anwesende" (SvG 111; see, too, SvG 120ff., 154).

jects of the representing, self-conscious subject” (SvG 132). The sufficient reason in this case comprises those a priori conditions of the possibility of experiencing the object, conditions projected by the transcendental subject and expressed in the form of eight transcendental principles. The import of this critical appropriation of Leibnizian rationality is not simply that an entity respectively exists only as an object and thus for a subject, but that the subject is equated with reason, a reason that assembles the conditions of the possibility of nature and freedom precisely in the sense of determining the sphere of what counts as a sufficient reason (SvG 127, 134, 137).

In this way Kant’s appropriation of Leibnizian rationality provides a modern version of the Parmenidean identification of being and thinking. Being and rational thinking are the same, but in the sense that only that for which a sufficient reason can be given can be said to be or, what is the same, can be said to be thought. But this identification—including, not least, its historical character—illustrates how being withdraws or withholds itself precisely in this way of presenting or dispensing itself. The objectness (*Gegenständigkeit*) of objects is, as Heidegger puts it, the being of beings for Kant, insofar as they can be experienced. As Heidegger puts it: “The new manner in which being dispenses itself consists not only in the fact that being now appears as objectness but that this appearing displays a decisiveness as a result of which being determines itself in the realm of the subjectivity of reason and only here” (SvG 137, 149). The question of being and its essential origin does not even surface, testifying to yet another way in which being withdraws here, and that question does not surface “because in the completely measured realm of *ratio* as reason and subjectivity, the complete justification of beings as such is decided and closed at the same time” (SvG 150). As we emphasized earlier, Heidegger is insistent that this philosophical conception persists in the present. Thus, he contends that the virulence of the atomic age rests upon the historical fact that being affords itself “as objectness for the subjectivity of reason” or, in other words, on “the unconditioned claim of the principle of sufficient reason in the form of complete rationality.” There is a claim to power, a *Machtanspruch*, in this claim of reason, determined by the *principium rationis*, one that, as Heidegger puts it, “unleashes the universal and total miscalculation of everything [as] . . . something computible” (SvG 138). Revealing what he understands

positively by being, he also observes how, in the atomic age's wholesale pursuit of computable sufficient reasons, "the particularity, individuation, and validity of the individual disappear in favor of total uniformity."<sup>36</sup> However, as the Greek experience amply attests (SvG 139f., 148, 154), what it means to be need not be identified with being an object.

Heidegger accordingly suggests that, if we consider this development properly and, that means, in a genuinely historical way, we may appreciate its limitations and lack of inevitability. The first condition for thinking this way is recognizing that we ourselves belong to this history and are called upon to respond to it. That is to say, we are called upon to respond to the epochal interplay of time-space in which being affords itself to us.<sup>37</sup> Thinking historically and responding to the fateful way being affords itself are thus one and the same and, indeed, one and the same in a way that steers clear of both nostalgia and prophecy. Such thinking is a reverential appropriation of that fateful interplay and Heidegger stresses how this thinking is possible only as a leap, a leap that enables us to grasp what has been (*das Gewesene*) by thinking ahead to what is yet unthought in it. "Thinking is reverentially thinking-ahead" (SvG 159). This leap in thinking, a leap that constitutes thinking being genuinely, that is, historically, is, Heidegger also remarks, "no repetition and no recurrence." This telling remark underscores the radically epochal, individual, and contingent character of being, something that eludes all thought of history in terms of tokens and types (including any "eternal recurrence of the like"), in terms of a realization of supra-temporal ideas and values or a distinction between the absolute and the relative (SvG 159f). Not

36. SvG 138; to this telling passage (telling because it identifies in terms of individuality what the "modern" conception of being supposedly neglects) one might add Heidegger's remark about the difference between being and beings: "Denn das Seiende ist ein jeweiliges und so ein vielfältiges; dagegen ist das Sein einzig, der absolute Singular in der unbedingten Singularität" (SvG 143).

37. SvG 146: "Aber wir stehen in dieser Lichtung keineswegs unangesprochen herum, sondern stehen in ihr als die vom Sein des Seienden in dessen Anspruch Genommenen. Wir sind als die in der Lichtung des Seins Stehenden die Beschickten, die in den Zeit-Spiel-Raum Eingräumten. Dies sagt: Wir sind die in diesem Spielraum und für ihn Gebrauchten, gebraucht, an der Lichtung des Seins zu bauen und zu bilden, im weiten vielfältigen Sinne: sie zu verwahren." SvG 147: "Nur insofern der Mensch seinem Wesen nach in einer Lichtung des Seins steht, ist er ein denkendes Wesen." In this connection (in the eleventh lecture) Heidegger introduces a fourth sense of "Satz" in the *Satz vom Grund*, coupling it with the third sense of it as a leap (first: *Satz* as *Aussage*, second: *Satz* as *Sagen*). That fourth sense is that of the musical "set" that carries the musician into the oncoming, requisite movement.

surprisingly, Heidegger regards the ever-increasing flight from history as symptomatic of the atomic age and the dawning of the time of the unconditioned claim of the principle of sufficient reason in the form of a consummate (complete and perfect) rationality (SvG 138).

#### IV. EXPLANATION, JUSTIFICATION, AND THE CONTINGENCY OF BEING

Hopefully, the preceding remarks have at least made clear, not only Heidegger's reasons for examining Leibniz's metaphysics, but also reasons why that examination deserves critical scrutiny itself. Heidegger contends that modernity's commitment to the universal sweep of the principle of sufficient reason, a commitment typified and cemented by Leibnizian rationality, blinds it to the irreducible contingency, individuality, and inexhaustibility of being.

However, Leibniz is a modern who recognizes that God's being is not grounded in something else, and he recognizes, too, that there are contingent truths about possible worlds, necessarily known by God, but no less contingent for being so. Moreover, this ungroundedness runs throughout his entire metaphysical system inasmuch as every entity not only expresses the self-groundedness of the primary being from a particular point of view but also instantiates contingent truths by virtue of membership in a possible world. In other words, contrary to Heidegger's claims, Leibniz clearly countenances aspects of being that are ungrounded in various senses of the word and, perhaps more importantly, suggests how that contingency and necessity can be thought together, irreducibly, in a metaphysical conception of being. Moreover, even if it is true in some sense for Leibniz that no absence is completely hidden, he nonetheless countenances a contingent aspect of finite being that explanation and justification presuppose but for which there is no explanation or justification. On all these counts, Leibniz can hardly be said to be oblivious to being, precisely if, following Heidegger, we take being to be in some respects utterly contingent, individual, and inexhaustible, with hidden and absent or at least inexplicable characteristics that are no less telling than features that are transparent or explicable.

This reading of Leibniz's metaphysics, to the extent that it can be sustained, presents a hefty challenge to Heidegger's interpretation of it.

Contrary to what Heidegger maintains, Leibnizian rationality, given the complexity of Leibniz's account of the principle of sufficient reason, does not without further ado cancel what Heidegger understands as the historicity of being. In order to make good on his criticism, Heidegger needs to demonstrate that Leibnizian rationality, with its appeal to creation, necessarily reduces being to being created, to being made. Heidegger does not provide the necessary demonstration and there are good reasons, some suggested by Leibniz and recounted above, to think that such a demonstration cannot be given.<sup>38</sup> The absence of such a demonstration calls into question the trenchancy of Heidegger's claim that that it is necessary to take leave of Leibnizian rationality and bracket causation completely in order, as he puts it, to "correspond to being" (SvG 95). What is questionable is not merely the rigid bifurcation of being and causation (or, equivalently, justification and explanation), but also the supposition that we can clearly draw the line of demarcation between being and causation.

Nevertheless, what Heidegger clearly gets right in his reading of the principle of sufficient reason is the notion that being in some sense grounds the beings that are cause and effect, ground and grounded. In this grounding, being is hidden and sustaining, present as the presence of beings yet in such a way that that very presencing is absent in some respects from any finite point of view. In other words, if Heidegger is wrong to think that explanation is, of necessity, ontologically reductive, he is right to think that being is in some sense irreducible to explanation. At the risk of redundancy, let me stress the fact that, on this score, Leibniz is in far more agreement with Heidegger than Heidegger appreciates. After all, creating does not exhaust what it means to be in the case of the creator and, as Leibniz seems to have seen quite clearly, what it means to be in the case of the created is not reducible to being created.

That said, the domain of disagreement between the two thinkers remains profound, inasmuch as Heidegger suspends any pretensions to a conception of the historically transcendent. His insistence on thinking

38. One reason would be the fundamental difference in the supposition about what it means to be (e.g., Heidegger might argue that his interpretation of the principle of sufficient reason requires a leap from the conventional, Leibnizian reading, a leap that suspends that reading). Another reason is the fact that the opposite holds (i.e., that contingency and the universal sweep of the principle of sufficient reason are compatible) and that Leibniz's philosophy provides a template for demonstrating as much.

being historically presents a considerable challenge to thinking being metaphysically. It does so not only because being is said to be inherently tied to our being-here (*Da-sein*) and thus historical, and not only because thinking being metaphysically is said to miss, that is, to forget this eventfulness (*Ereignis*) as such, but also because it proposes an explanation, indeed, an historical explanation of this obliviousness. In other words, his position can only be trenchantly dismissed if it can be demonstrated that we have access to metaphysical truths rather than, as Heidegger submits, only historical access to being. If we are, indeed, barred as finite beings from the sort of knowledge that only an infinite mind could have, then there is reason to be suspicious of presumptions—again, on the part of the age of Leibniz, if not Leibniz himself—that being in some sense or another, despite its infinity, is fully determinate. For if the future of being is, indeed, pre-determined, so is ours.