

PhD Thesis

**Parallels and Intersections in the Philosophy of
Leibniz and Schopenhauer**

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I. Aim of the Dissertation, Scope of the Topic

My dissertation attempts to draw parallels between the works of two prominent philosophical authors, Leibniz and Schopenhauer, which may at first seem surprising, because according to traditional interpretations, there are few philosophers whose way of thinking is more distant from one another than that of these two thinkers. Leibniz, as the philosopher labeled the eternal optimist, with his famous claim that *this world is the best of all possible worlds*, represents a very different attitude from Schopenhauer, who in turn refers to the world as the *worst of all possible worlds*. It is therefore easy to understand why he is often referred to as the most pessimistic author in the history of philosophy.

One of the aims of my thesis was precisely to liberate these two authors from the seemingly banal labels of the optimist-pessimist distinction, and to demonstrate that Leibniz's thinking is far more critical and nuanced than simply interpreting that statement on a happiness- maximizing/experience ground, and that we celebrate the perfection of the world without any negative sentiment. My dissertation has placed great emphasis on analysing the sense in which the world can be considered to be perfect, and the results have led me to conclude that Leibniz's optimism, while *a priori* correct, is difficult and only partially transferable to *a posteriori* worldviews. Leibniz thinks that God chooses one of an infinite number of worlds which he judges to be the *best*, and that therefore the world is *a priori* perfect, since his *best* judgment is true of it before its creation. At the same time, this judgment of God derives mainly from the most optimal operation of the principles of simplicity and diversity, *i.e.*, this world is the simplest of an infinite number of worlds in terms of its operation and, perhaps more importantly, it is the most diverse world possible, and therefore the one in which the greatest number of creatures are found. The latter, in turn, derives from the Leibnizian principle that existence is good; God does the best for his potential creatures by allowing them to appear and exist in the actual world as beings. *A posteriori*, however, Leibniz does not deny that suffering, evil, or, simply put, *evil*, appears in the world.

Schopenhauer's philosophy has a completely different dynamic. He wants to express the minimalism of the world in the doctrine of *the worst possible worlds*, which in short means that the world is just good enough to sustain itself; if it were any worse, it would no longer be capable of existence. In this sense, it is the worst, since worlds worse than this are not *possible worlds*. They are not metaphysically possible because they cannot be realized,

they cannot sustain their existence. It can be seen that Schopenhauer also approaches the world from an *a priori* value judgement, to which it is also worth adding that for him the world is not created by God, but by a blind, selfish and irrational metaphysical force, the *will*, which does not consciously create the world as it is, but as an archetypal force, naturally strives for a minimal solution. At the same time, Schopenhauer also strongly emphasizes suffering in the *a posteriori* sense in his works, essentially performing a calculus which results in his assertion that the suffering in the world always exceeds the amount of happiness in the world. A classic example is that when a predatory animal kills its prey, the suffering of the prey is clearly greater than the pleasure of the other animal that consumes it, which is not happy by killing the other, but only reduces its own shortage, or one might say, its own suffering (hunger) by consuming its prey. Although Schopenhauer strongly emphasizes the existence of *a posteriori* suffering throughout, his life's work is mostly based on revealing escape routes to escape from the cycle of the will in the world, or even to avoid suffering. Such paths include art or asceticism. In this respect, the world could indeed be worse: a world where there are no escape routes at all.

From a brief sketch of the attitudes of the two oeuvres, it is clear that the two authors' basic worldviews seem to mark the two ends of an imagined spectrum. The main aim of this dissertation has been to demonstrate, by means of an abundant argument, that the two authors' thinking is much closer to each other and results in many more points of intersection than is conveyed by the spectral view. In some respects Leibniz is very pessimistic, while Schopenhauer also has some very optimistic lines of thought. Consequently, in their philosophy they often arrive at similar statements about the world, and their approaches are not so different as Schopenhauer himself tries to distance himself from Leibniz's ideas. It can be said that the starting point and attitude of the two authors are diametrically opposed, but the inevitable consequences of their statements coincide. The similarities in their systems are not merely coincidental, but follow inevitably from their basic theses. Of course, I am not claiming that the worldviews of the two philosophers can be reconciled one-to-one, since I will also point out throughout this thesis the numerous problems that illustrate the gap between the two authors' worldviews, but there are aspects that make the spectrum approach inapplicable, and along these aspects the two authors are compatible.

In my dissertation, I argue that the comparison of the two authors is justified if only because they both opposed the mainstream philosophy of their time and occupied a kind of "heretical" position with their oeuvre. To illustrate this, I mention the rhizome theory of

Deleuze and Guattari, in the sense that if Western philosophy is conceived of as an upwardly ascending tree, each branch of which is a major philosopher, then the two thinkers I have highlighted are rather part of a sprawling root world: although they have nurtured the horizontally ascending tree of philosophical history, they are both less presented and more representative of a diverse and divergent way of thinking from the mainstream. They embodied a vertically evolving philosophy as opposed to a horizontally evolving one.

The other aspect on the basis of which the comparison is also justified is the syncretism in the two works. The term itself refers to the tendency of a philosophical author to unite several schools of thought within his own system. Leibniz is one of the most important representatives of this, since he was one of the first in the history of modern philosophy to incorporate the thought of the Eastern, especially Chinese, schools of philosophy into his own philosophies. There is a large body of literature showing, for example, that the importance of harmony and numerosity in Leibniz's oeuvre is a consequence of this Eastern influence, but it is also worth noting that Leibniz was particularly concerned with China and was keen to stress its cultural importance, even for Europe. And Schopenhauer, perhaps even more than Leibniz, adopted the wisdom of Eastern teachings, making many references to the Indian *Upanishads* in his main work *The World as Will and Representation*, or the state of nirvana, as known from Buddhism, is also significant in his own conception: the breaking of the cycle of will can bring about precisely this transcendent state.

II. Methods Applied

Since the effectiveness of the dissertation depends crucially on the ability to make correct judgements about the similarities and differences between the two systems, I considered it of paramount importance to analyse in detail the thought structure behind the claims of the two authors and to analyse the concepts that fundamentally influence these concepts. However, it is worth pointing out here the difficulty that we cannot really speak of an actual system in the work of either philosopher. The use of the term is best explained by Schopenhauer, who took a stand against system philosophies (Hegel) and was very critical of system philosophers. Nevertheless, his philosophy has a framework and unshakeable certainties to which it always adheres and which he accepts as valid in all circumstances, and in his various works, or even within a single work, he often uses the same formulations, often literally repeated, From this

point of view, Schopenhauer's philosophy can be said to be a system, and can be approached in this way, but of course it cannot be called a system philosophy, if only because Schopenhauer also gives room for contradictory theories within his own framework, *e.g.* in the third chapter of this dissertation, I will deal at length with the question of how the doctrine of eternal and unchanging ideas taken over from Plato, which Schopenhauer also interprets as unchanging racial character, can be reconciled with the ideas of the evolution of species or the transformation of the world caused by cataclysms, which he also holds, but which nevertheless give rise to contradictions.

Interestingly, Leibniz's thinking also has similar features to Schopenhauer's. In his case, too, the almost verbatim formulations appear which are present throughout the works and dominate his entire career. In fact, Leibniz may be said to have adhered to the same framework throughout his career. Yet even within the system, there are fluctuations, sudden changes of direction; *e.g.* the young Leibniz considered the fossils to be a mere play of the Earth, and deduced their origin from the movement of the tectonic plates, thus denying their organic origin and, more importantly, rejecting the possibility of extinct animal species, but later, in his *Protogaea*, he overruled this and accepted the then growing archaeological position on the extinction of primitive animals and their organic remains.

The analysis of the structures of thought begins with an analysis of the basic propositions in the first chapter. This is particularly important in the case of Leibniz, for whom we can draw on Ortega to say that, although he loved the principles, he did not respect them. This is most evident in the fact that, although he makes clear and categorical statements about the various propositions, he does not follow or even contradicts these fixed statements in their use (*e.g.* he confuses the ontological and epistemological validity of a principle and draws ontological conclusions from an epistemological definition, thus committing a borderline violation between the two spheres). My method, therefore, is what Adorno proposes in his *Philosophische Terminologie* when we undertake an analysis of philosophical terminology: we must not stop at a definition given by a philosopher, but immerse ourselves in a deep and penetrating analysis to uncover the true function and meaning of the concept in the mind of the thinker. Thus, in Leibniz, the *principle of sufficient ground*, the principle of contradiction, and the various ways of formulating identity will be analysed at length in this thesis. All these, however, are preceded, again borrowing from Ortega's approach, by the *principle of the fundamentals*, which, according to Ortega, means that although Leibniz never explicitly states this principle, it nevertheless determines his

thinking crucially, since he tries to trace all his statements back to a foundation, whether it be a statement of the ontological or logical sphere. In essence, Leibniz accepts as true only those propositions for which, in a mathematical model, a derivation from an earlier principle can be found.

The problem of the fundamental theorem is also of central importance in Schopenhauer's philosophy, and it was therefore justified to devote the first chapter of the dissertation to its exploration in the authors analysed, thus *laying the foundations* for the rest of the thesis. Schopenhauer had already spoken of the fourfold root of the sufficient ground, and this, as we shall see in the section on results later, corresponds to some extent to the use of the theorem by Leibniz.

The second main section analyses Leibniz's and Schopenhauer's worldview, the dynamics of the world's functioning and emergence, and thus outlines the framework within which the comparative aspects can be brought into play. In this chapter, it is also explored in what sense the world is best for Leibniz and worst for Schopenhauer.

In my view, the third chapter is the most innovative part of the dissertation, dealing with a topic that is not necessarily the most central theme for either author, yet the issues that arise here strongly influence whether the framework that philosophers operate within can continue to be maintained, or whether its boundaries need to be expanded or revised. This main chapter discusses the term 'species' in the two works, closely linked to the conceptual pair of variation and diversity. Both philosophers attempt to operate with a static concept of species, but both face the difficulty that theories of species development cannot be interpreted within their own philosophical systems. This is why this is an important point of intersection for the two philosophers. Just as the theme of the last main chapter is the question of freedom and individuality, where there is also a tension between what the two philosophers intend to stand for and what necessarily follows from their system.

It was also an important methodological decision to include three excursions in the dissertation. The first analyses the philosophical and social implications of the failure of theodicy, the second draws parallels between von Schopenhauer and the thought of a Renaissance philosopher, Nicolaus Cusanus, and the third explores the influence of Leibniz on the natural philosophy of the French Enlightenment. Although not an excursus but a main text, the text also devotes considerable attention to Kant's relation to the principles, which is also discussed at length. The excursus and the Kantian analysis were methodologically

necessary because it is clear that, historically, Leibniz and Schopenhauer are separated by an era, and a very significant one at that. In a sense, Leibniz laid the foundations for Kant's thought, and Schopenhauer, who claimed to be a follower of Kant, drew enormously on the thought of his predecessor, and it is not too much to say that he judged Leibniz by Kant's achievements. This is also the case with the French Enlightenment, a period which was a kind of intermediary between Leibniz and Schopenhauer, and Schopenhauer's opposition to Leibniz is partly due to the fact that one of his favorite authors, Voltaire, is very negative about the German philosopher. Moreover, as the first excursus demonstrates, Enlightenment thought was strongly influenced by the contradictions, if not the failure, of the Leibniz theodicy, and one might even say that it was this failure that most inspired eighteenth-century philosophy. And this had a great influence on the way Schopenhauer thought about Leibniz, and perhaps this is where his negative attitude towards his predecessor and his often disparaging remarks can be truly understood. The Cusanus excursus was justified in order to explore in greater depth the workings of the Schopenhauerian framework, which bears striking parallels with the thought of the Renaissance philosopher.

3. List of Results

The thesis, after setting out the topic, analyses the principles and concludes with the following results. Schopenhauer distinguishes four roots of the sufficient ground: its origin, its cognition, its existence and its action. By comparing this with Leibniz's thought, we can say that the first form of the sufficient ground corresponds to what is the domain of the *causa* in Leibniz. The basis of cognition is the domain of *ratio* in the Leibnizian system, while the basis of action, through motivation, is the domain where ratio and causa meet in both authors, essentially the world of rationes invades the sphere of causa. In addition to establishing parallels, we should also note that the transcendental philosophical character of the basis of being does not really correspond to anything in Leibniz's system, so that, in addition to the similarities, we can also note an important difference.

We also found important parallels when analysing the two authors' conceptions of necessity. To briefly underline the point, these common points could be captured in the way that both recognised a kind of action according to one's own nature (Leibniz) or one's own character (Schopenhauer), which, interestingly, was not a barrier to freedom for either of

them, but rather its guarantee. With Leibniz, God acts according to his own nature when he acts well, and is thus free not to have to act otherwise, whereas with Schopenhauer, beings have the privilege of not having to contradict their character if they do not want to. At the same time, however, it is worth emphasizing here what Neill and Shapshay say: in Schopenhauer, the intelligible character has no real freedom of choice, since his reactions to a motive are predetermined, yet this is not a deterministic conception, because in the sphere of the intelligible character there is no causality, which is a fundamental condition of determinism.

In relation to the results of the theodicy analyses, the sense in which the world *is the best possible* for Leibniz was examined, with a strong emphasis on the fact that *perfection* is not to be understood according to a happiness-maximising, event-based approach, but rather as arising from the basic assumption that for Leibniz the best thing that can happen to a potential being is that it comes into existence in the universe. It is precisely for this reason that the perfection of the world arises from the optimal balance of the greatest possible diversity and the simplest possible operation, where, as I have noted, diversity is a primary principle in relation to simplicity, since the latter becomes paramount, in addition to reflecting the wisdom of God, in order to avoid a situation in which the rules of operation, by their complexity, take the place of existents. I have also analysed at length the relation of the principle of diversity to the criterion of compatibility: the simpler the rules, the easier it is to comply with them, *i.e.* such conditions of existence are an obstacle for very few existents. In a later, longer subsection, appended to the third main section, I investigated whether the existence of the best possible creature, defined as the simplest in its operation and compatible with as many other creatures as possible, is necessary in the best possible world. The thesis found in the *spirit* the perfect creature in the Leibnizian conception.

Leibniz's conception of the world was also compared with Schopenhauer's worst world conception, distinguishing *a priori* from *a posteriori*. As I mentioned earlier, Leibniz's world is *a priori* good, while Schopenhauer's is *a posteriori* bad, so the analysis provided an opportunity to assess Leibniz's *a posteriori* worldview and to reassess Schopenhauer's *a priori* world. At the same time, Schopenhauer is not categorically pessimistic *a posteriori*, since for him too the world can be shaped as a consequence of individual choices. The same is a present possibility with Leibniz: although we have no control over the validity of *a priori* principles, we do have a moral responsibility in the way we make our world.

The essay uses a non-traditional comparison with the chapter on the analysis of the natural philosophical ideas of the two authors, including the analysis of the term species. In Leibniz, I found that he basically starts from a static conception of *preformation*, which in turn hinders his account of the evolution of species. Preformation has served as a kind of assurance of the permanent survival of the most diverse world possible, which I have sought to capture by coining the concept of *recurrent diversity*. However, this maximised diversity is also violated by the phenomenon of species extinction, as Leibniz acknowledged. Throughout the thesis, I have pursued several possible solutions, such as rejecting the validity of the diversity principle; making a distinction between states of the world at different times, *i.e.* assuming that if in state *A* there can be x number of species in the world, then in state *B* this number can be $x+1$, and in a state *C* it can be $x-1$. In the end, however, I argued for the solution that the principle of diversity must be judged in terms of eternity, so that it is irrelevant (in terms of the validity of the principle) whether a species exists now or *has already existed*, since even if it becomes extinct, it was part of the universe. I have also analysed at length the importance of Leibniz's principle of continuity, and in the third excursus I have also looked at how this principle influenced important Enlightenment nature philosophers such as Diderot and Bonnet.

In the section of the same main chapter on Schopenhauer's conception of species, I was mainly interested in how to reconcile Schopenhauer's Platonic ideology with the question of the evolution of the head and the extinction of species. I came to the conclusion that all these phenomena are not incompatible with the doctrine of the immutability of ideas, since the conflicts between ideas do not change the ideas themselves, but the *relationship* between them, and, moreover, the appearance of a new species does not create a new idea, but an idea that already exists (forever), that does not appear on the everyday level of images, but now appears to the observer *as an appearance*. In the same way, the new property of a species is potentially already a principle that has always been present in the idea, but until its appearance it was not emphasized on the level of images.

The fourth main chapter deals with his ideas on bipartite freedom and individuality. I goes through Leibniz's various categories of freedom and supplemented the analyses with insights from moral philosophy. Moreover, I have combined these with considerations from natural philosophy, concluding that the moral instinct within us acts as God's guide, the same dynamic as the reproductive instinct, which is the divine means of continually maximizing (reproducing) diversity.

With Schopenhauer, I have mainly focused on analysing how freedom of choice is possible in a worldview that often seems very deterministic. There was an inherent problem in deriving character from ideas, since, if one assumes that ideas are always present and unchanging, then character development is difficult to imagine. I discover that freedom in the Schopenhauerian sense is a kind of alienated freedom, not exclusively manifested in the freedom of man's self-realization, but rather in the free acts of the metaphysical will. Man nevertheless has the possibility of defying the command of the will and of escaping from the cycle of the will by various routes of escape. The detailed analysis of these paths is very important for this thesis, because it shows us that even in the 'worst possible world' there is an escape, that is, the quality of existence can be shaped within certain limits.



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List of publications related to the dissertation

Hungarian book chapters (1)

1. **Karkusz, P. D.:** Faj- és környezetvédelmi aspektusok Leibniz filozófiájában.
In: Az ember és gazdagsága egészséges és biztonságos környezetben. Szerk.: Karlovitz
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Hungarian scientific articles in Hungarian journals (4)

2. **Karkusz, P. D.:** Leibniziánus aspektusok Charles Bonnet és Denis Diderot
természetfilozófiájában.
Nagyerdei Almanach. 12 (24), 67-83, 2022. EISSN: 2062-3305.
3. **Karkusz, P. D.:** Schopenhauer művészetfilozófiája.
Valóság. 65 (9), 76-86, 2022. ISSN: 0324-7228.
4. **Karkusz, P. D.:** A teodícea problémája és hatása a francia felvilágosodás társadalomfilozófiájára.
Valóság. 64 (3), 97-106, 2021. ISSN: 0324-7228.
5. **Karkusz, P. D.:** Teodícea-kísérletek a kora felvilágosodásban: Leibniz és Malebranche.
Nagyerdei Almanach. 9 (19), 1-11, 2019. EISSN: 2062-3305.





List of other publications

Hungarian scientific articles in Hungarian journals (3)

6. **Karkusz, P. D.:** Disszimuláció Rousseau Első értekezésében.
Nagyredei Almanach. 11 (23), 35-46, 2021. EISSN: 2062-3305.
7. **Karkusz, P. D.:** A pszichoanalízis filozófiai kritikája Karl Popper és Wittgenstein munkásságának keresztmetszetében.
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8. **Karkusz, P. D.:** Az egyén helye és szerepe a Schopenhauer filozófiában.
Nagyredei Almanach. 6 (1), 132-156, 2015. EISSN: 2062-3305.

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