

# Ethnocentric Implications of Leibniz's Subject-Predicate Notion of Truth

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The Predicate-in-Notion Principle is the core principle of G.W. Leibniz's conception of truth that he developed in his *Discourse in Metaphysics* and his *Letters with Arnauld*. Leibniz explains his principle to Arnauld thus: "Finally, I have given a decisive argument—one that I think has the force of a demonstration—that always, in every true affirmative proposition, necessary or contingent, universal or particular, the notion of the predicate is somehow included in that of the subject—*praedicatum inest subjecto* [Latin], or I don't know what truth is!" (Leibniz 1989). In the process of creating a principle that uses a self-evident, subject-predicate form of language to derive truth in propositions, consequences of an ethnocentric nature threaten to sully the name of the otherwise pluralistic, cultured Leibniz. Despite its fundamental influence on modern philosophy, I argue that the hierarchal and ethnocentric nature of the Predicate-in-Notion principle undermines the legitimacy of other languages by judging them based on

their lack of an explicit subject-predicate form, therefore deeming the people who spoke such languages as inferior. This argument is supported by an examination of Leibniz's Principle of Predicate-in-Notion, postmodern philosophical reviews of Leibniz's principle, the subsequent implication of Leibniz's principle on null-subject languages, and a contemporary comparison to Benjamin Whorf's ethnocentric approach to the Hopi Native American language.

Leibnizian scholars have found many reasons to believe that he advocated for the cultural respect of others. However, in providing evidence of his cultural reverence for the Chinese people, I will show that Leibnizian theory has ethnocentric qualities, despite Leibniz having no ethnocentric or racist intent. Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz was not an overt racist or an out-right ethnocentric aristocrat who looked down on others who did not look the same as him; he was quite the opposite. Leibniz advocated for understanding, diversity, and inclusion. In discussing Chinese culture, in his *Novissima Sinica*, Leibniz was known to regale others with how the Chinese lived harmoniously:

They surpass us in practical philosophy, that is, in the precepts of ethics and politics adapted to the present life... how beautifully all the laws of the Chinese, in contrast to those of other people, are directed to the achievement of public tranquility and the establishment of social order...  
(Leibniz & Harsberg,)

Despite the prevalent differences in terms of culture and language between Europe and China, Leibniz cared only for the moral nature of Chinese society and the "rational self-regulating character" of it (Nelson 4). This praise of their culture came years before the critiques of two notable philosophers, Johan Gottfried von Herder and Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, who claimed the harmonious and tranquil nature of the Chinese was nothing more than the reflexive nature of the society to submit to their

stoic emperor, lest be punished for any sort of free-flowing thought (Nelson 5). Leibniz's understanding of Chinese societal equilibrium was that it was not achieved through the tyranny of a monarch; instead, it was through the free-agency and harmonious participation of the people with one another that created tranquility (Nelson 5). Despite Leibniz's awareness of vast cultural differences between the Chinese and himself, he expressed an understanding and appreciation for their philosophical and societal contributions that saw them not as inferior. Despite later misinterpretation of his theories for ethnocentric purposes, this is evidence that Leibniz lacked ethnocentric intent.

As further support of Leibniz's progressive thought, it is noteworthy that Leibniz created an argument against the moral permissibility of slavery. Through this argument, Leibniz fights against the permissibility of slavery by constructing a 3-layered argument which includes the rights of rational souls being over the supposed absolute right of a slaveholder, the absolute rights of a slaveholder being still in violation of the laws of equity, charity, and piety, and the denial of child slavery through Aristotelian theory (Jorati). The moral highlights of these arguments come in part to the universality of the claims to rights that a person has against being owned. As the first layer of Leibniz's 3-layered argument states, "This is the right of the rational souls which are naturally and unalienably free," Leibniz not only decries slavery but also defends the view that all humans have rational souls as he speaks of all persons being impermissible to the moral endangerment of slavery (Jorati 6). As the argument continues, the second layer makes a compelling case towards the universality of rights when Leibniz lays a hand out to even an atheist as he expresses that the same rights of

equity, charity, and piety would apply to them as well. This is because, as Leibniz puts it, “there would be a natural obligation even on the hypothesis ... that God does not exist, ... since care for one’s preservation and well-being certainly lays on men many requirements about taking care of others” (Jorati 11). Basically, through the self-interest of oneself, they are driven to help others. Lastly, through the third layer of his argument, Leibniz uses the Aristotelian theory of natural slavery against itself by supposing that since children are yet to meet their full potentiality, they don’t meet the Aristotelian criteria of “incompatibility of conducting themselves and therefore deserving of being property” (Jorati 13). Through this universality of protecting persons, children, and even those of lacking faith from an egregious crime against humanity, like slavery, it would seem that Leibniz would be a philosopher naturally predisposed to create a system that would favor most people harmoniously and equally as possibly. While it may have been in good faith, the principle that I will now revisit would have lasting implications for cultures whose languages stray from the explicit subject-predicate form.

With evidence of Leibniz’s advocacy for the respect of all persons, no matter their cultural differences in mind, I will now explain how Leibniz’s Principle of Predicate-in-Notion has been interpreted to promote ethnocentric agendas. Leibniz’s Principle of the Predicate-in-Notion, or more commonly known as his general notion of truth, is defined in his *Discourse on Metaphysics* as such:

Now it is evident that all true predication has some basis in the nature of things and that, when a proposition is not an identity, that is when the predicate is not explicitly contained in the subject, it must be contained in it

virtually. That is what the philosophers call *in-esse*, when they say that the predicate is in the subject. Thus the subject term must always contain the predicate term, so that one who understands perfectly the notion of the subject would also know that the predicate belongs to it.

This definition, and the short-hand correspondence between Leibniz and Arnauld come to the consensus of there being a base, or most simple, form for a proposition. Leibniz affirms that as long as the notion of the predicate is within that notion of the subject as a complete concept, the proposition is self-evidently true (Muhit 118). Yet, a distinction was made in this definition by a Professor of English at Trinity College, Cambridge.

In 1949, Charlie Dunbar Broad proposed a linguistic distinction that allows for a philosophical reevaluation and critique of Leibniz's principle. Broad published an article in *Theoria*, XV entitled: *Leibniz's Predicate-in-Notion Principle and Some of its Alleged Consequences*. In presenting the formulations and definitions of Leibniz's general notion of truth, just as Md. Abdul Muhit would much later in 2011, Broad had a slight variant of the definition which says:

In every true affirmative proposition, whether it be necessary or contingent, universal or singular, the notion of the predicate is contained either explicitly or implicitly in that of the object. **If it is contained explicitly the proposition is analytic; if only implicitly, it is synthetic** (Broad 54).

At the end of Broad's redefinition of Leibniz's principle, he adds a linguistic explanation of an explicit proposition as one being analytical and an implicit proposition as one being synthetic. With this redefinition, one can begin to see the split, or conflict, in language. Once the predicate is contained **explicitly** in the subject, it is analytic. If only **implicitly**, it is synthetic. The

importance of this deviation comes in the definition of an analytic truth: “one whose truth depends on the meaning of its constituent terms alone.” A synthetic truth is “one whose truth depends also on facts about the world that the sentence represents.” Leibniz, speaking on contingent truths, which one could surmise are synthetic because of their relation to existence and time, actually states that “they are not synthetic to any degree whatsoever, as is generally believed; they are just as analytic as necessary truths are”. Leibniz would explain that the synthetic appearance of these truths would only lie in their lack of a complete analysis of conception. This problem that arises for Leibniz is later settled as he uses God’s Infinitum just as he would mathematics. Because humans only have access to the finite knowledge of their experience, they are unable to understand the infinite knowledge that God is capable of in understanding the world. Leibniz surmises that if persons were to have the infinite knowledge of God in all things then they too could see the contingent truths that have yet to have happened as easily as necessary, or overtly analytic, truths (§8 Discourse, Muhit 118-128). For this reason, as humankind is nowhere near-infinite knowledge, I will now delve into the implications of the explicit and implicit general notion of truth split.

Leibniz once said: “Languages are the best mirror of the human mind and precise analysis of the significations of words would tell us more than anything else, about the operations of the understanding” (Leibniz & Remnant). As Anna Wierzbicka, a Polish linguist professor at Australian National University, points out, “the profundity of Leibniz’s insight lay precisely in that plural... It is only ‘languages’ in the plural which allows us to see and appreciate the diversity of cultures.” What she is pointing out in this statement is the affinity for young scholars,

especially philosophical linguists, to take Leibniz's message of language as being the singular languages of cultures (e.g French, German, Spanish, etc.) (Wierzbicka 292). This is predominantly where the crux of the issue lies. As languages have been singled out and juxtaposed to the explicit subject-predicate form, many languages have been ruled as inferior. This inferiority is associated with being mentally deficient and lacking intellectual credibility. Due to the lack of explicit subject-predicate form, the following languages, known as "Null-Subject Languages," fall into this judgment of inferiority.

A Null-Subject Language is a language that permits an independent clause to lack an explicit subject (Duguine 2017). To name a few, these languages include Italian, Arabic, Polish, Chinese, and Hebrew. The common feature of these languages is the ability to "pro-drop" which allows for the omission of pronouns as the referent lies within the verb rather than a subject-object (Duguine 2017). For instance, the iconic, "I think, therefore I am," would be directly translated from Polish as "Think, therefore am," because of the lack of need for the subject-object (Bloomfield, Duguine). Just by reading the statement as it is translated makes it seem like the person speaking would have some sort of disability or mental partitioning. Without the explicit subject when translated, it seems to the untrained speaker or newly translating that there is a deficiency in the language that they are translating from or attempting to speak to. The interesting part is the languages that don't "pro-drop" and have complete explicit subject-predicate connections; these languages are none other than English, German, and French (Bloomfield).

The implications begin to become much clearer as the picture of "European Elite" countries that have some of the

greatest philosophical minds--Kant, Germany (Prussia), Leibniz, France, and Locke, England--come to mind. As more and more philosophical minds come from areas that have the languages of "better understanding," an ideology of inequality is perpetuated, and an ethnocentric mindset can sow the seeds for a lack of understanding and pluralistic language like Leibniz originally advocated for. It may seem far-fetched that a person would judge another intelligence by the language they speak just as Hegel and Herder misjudged the Chinese culture and the idea of their emperor just because of the lack of overt "democratic freedom", but the same perpetuation of linguistic misunderstanding and ethnocentric mindset occurred more recently than Leibniz or Hegel (Nelson 5).

Benjamin Lee Whorf was an American Linguist who in 1940 was studying a tribe of Native American's named the Hopi. In his study of this tribe, he began to hear no signs of reverence to time or the discussion of time as he, an English-speaking man, knew it. This is what Whorf said of the Hopi:

After long and careful study and analysis the Hopi language is seen to contain no words, grammatical forms, constructions or expressions that refer directly to what we call time, or to past, present, or future, or to enduring or lasting, or to motion as kinematic rather than dynamic (i .e. as a continuous translation in space and time rather than as an exhibition of dynamic effort in a certain process) or that even refer to space in such a way as to exclude that

element of extension or existence that we call time, and so  
 by implication leave  
 a residue that could be referred to as time.

The “discovery” was that the Hopi people, as they did not speak or refer to time according to Whorf, had no understanding of time as it moves in a continuum as English-speaking persons do. Whorf, through his study, speaks about the Hopi people in an exoticized wonder using words such as “the mystical period” and “the psychic-mental” to describe the way that the Hopi people might attempt to look into the future the same way that Whorf would predict based on the continuum of time and objects around him (Whorf 67-72). It was discovered in 1983 that the Hopi people had an indication of time all along when Ekkehart Malotki, a German-American linguist, wrote an intensive 600-page study about the explanation of Hopi time grammar in expansive detail (Malotki 1983).

Despite the proper research being done to return the Hopi people to a society that, to the known world, had a conception of time and didn’t live shrouded in a world of magic and exoticized mystical metaphysics, American pop culture had already grabbed on to the story and made jokes at the expense of the Hopi (Greenway 1964); enough so that when the ethnography for 1971 came along, the Hopi were labeled as time being “nearly incomprehensible to them” (Euler 1971). Whorf’s exoticization of the Hopi people was due to his method of judging their language by Eurocentric standards. If Whorf had studied the language of the Hopi from a broader perspective in the way that Malotki did, he would have attributed more value to their culture and intelligence. Leibniz’s Predicate-in-Notion principle has the same implications when used to judge languages that do not meet the explicit subject-predicate standard. Just as Whorf’s narrow

perspective judged the Hopi people as inferior, Leibniz's principle can be used to undermine the culture and value of people that speak implicitly structured languages such as Null-Subject Languages. Through the analysis of Leibniz's principle of Predicate-in-Notion and contemporary scholars' work, like Whorf's, I hope to convey that comprehensive research and understanding of any subject is necessary to avoid the misuse and misinterpretation of well-intended theories or principles.

Overall, I believe that Leibniz was advocating for a system of base, or simple, notions of truth to allow all of humankind to be able to understand more clearly and distinctly. Language was an intuitive approach to an equal, basic, and systematic understanding of truth as every person requires it for effective interaction. Leibniz's ideal for an exchanging of languages to make for pluralistic learning rather than a singular judgment relates to his idea of pre-established harmony and societal tranquility because it requires all parts of the whole to come together for the advancement of the said whole. The crack in the surface came in the form of the explicit-implicit distinction and the translation barrier between them. Through the roots of ethnocentrism, a culture that is the origin point for an explicit, ideal linguistic structure of necessary truth will never fully understand a culture that communicates itself through a language of different standards. The misuse of Leibniz's Principle of Predicate-in-Notion makes it possible for a well-intended theory of language to promote hierarchal and ethnocentric biases.

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