Chapter 2
Leibniz’s Two-Pronged Dialectic

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1 Introduction

In a number of papers, I have argued that, in addition to the “hard” rationality through which Leibniz’s rationalism is most familiar, it is imperative to acknowledge the existence and centrality in his thought of another form of rationality, which I proposed to dub “soft”. Several prominent Leibniz researchers – some of them present in the meeting from which the present book originates – have contested, on a variety of grounds, my suggestion, giving rise to an interesting and productive debate. The purpose of this chapter is not to respond directly to these criticisms. Its contribution to our ongoing discussion consists rather in scrutinizing an important instance of the hard-soft distinction in Leibniz’s work. Focusing on this instance will permit not only a better understanding of its seeming paradoxical nature but also, at the meta-level, to realize the rational power of softness as an argumentative strategy. I believe these two results will sharpen and deepen the debate and lead us together, if not to its solution, at least to clarifying the issues at stake.

The central, and prima facie most problematic case, of Leibniz’s conception and use of rationality I will examine is his *sui generis* “dialectic”, which comprises what may be properly called his “art of controversies”. In the vast territory of rationality, Leibniz’s “art of controversies” occupies a peculiar position. He conceives it sometimes as a calculus that decides rigorously and unquestionably which of the opposed positions is true and which is false, and sometimes as a negotiation strategy leading to a conciliation of the adversaries’ positions, which cannot therefore be logically contradictory. While the former is a typical “hard” rationality approach, the latter is typically “soft” in nature.

A question that immediately arises is why, instead of treating these two forms of handling controversies as two fundamentally different Leibnizian approaches to quite distinct kinds of debate-generating opposition, should one insist in subsuming...
them under one single label. Doesn’t one thereby generate the alleged paradox one
will have to struggle to solve, namely, how can hard and soft rationality live peace-
fully, conceptually united under the same roof? For, having pointed out this distinc-
tion and having stressed the profound character of the opposition in question, it is
up to me, if I undertake to defend the one-dialectic thesis, to show what is actually
shared by this dialectic’s so diverging manifestations. Furthermore, by defending
such thesis, I am contributing to the suspicion as to how radical and profound their
opposition can be if they are in fact united at a deeper level – a suspicion it is also up
to me to dispel. Why should I create with my own hands a situation that puts upon
my shoulders such a heavy burden?

I confess that when I decided to analyze the particular case of Leibnizian di-
alectic in the context of the hard-soft debate I intended, through it, to shed light
on the difference between these two kinds of rationality. That is, I sought thereby
to further support my earlier arguments in favor of their distinction and hopefully
also deepen their separation. Rather than giving up the alter and contenting myself
with an etiam, as had been intimated by Schepers (2004), the contrast between the
two dialectics would provide additional evidence in support of the irreducibility of
Leibniz’s soft rationality to its hard counterpart, thus reinforcing my rejoinder to
Schepers (Dascal 2004b).3

To be sure, neither Schepers nor me contested the fact that both varieties of ratio-
nality somehow exist side by side in Leibniz, but we viewed this coexistence quite
differently: Whereas his etiam was an unwilling concession, mine was an emphatic
assertion; whereas for him it was to be accounted for by the different contexts of use
of the one and only rationality – the hard or, as he put it, “radical” one – admitted by
Leibniz, for me its sources were to be found in the irreducible difference between his
two fundamental metaphysical principles; consequently, whereas for him the unity
doctrine was hardly a problem, for me it was on the verge of the impossible.
If I wanted to hold both, the full force of the otherness of soft rationality and the
possibility of its coexistence and cooperation with its hard sister in one and the
same rational task, it was clear that the burden of proof was on me. I would have to
show that the one could not subsist without the other, and that togetherness ought to
be given no less attention than otherness.

Once I realized this, I also realized why Bréhier’s quote struck me as the nearly
perfect motto for this chapter. Choosing to commemorate Leibniz’s 300th birthday
by focusing on his dialectic and especially on the inner conflict between its two
trends, he highlighted perhaps the fundamental problem of Leibniz’s rationalism;
asking “whence comes the union, in one and the same mind” of these opposed
tendencies, he demanded an explanation for how can coherence be preserved in
uniting what, on the face of it, is incommensurable – as a well known 20th century
historian of science would put it.

Besides the intrinsic value of solving this puzzle, I further realized the windfall
benefit that would ensue, as far as the aim of establishing the indispensable role of
soft rationality in Leibniz’s thought is concerned, from achieving such a solution
and thus discharging the above mentioned burden of proof. For it became clear to
me that the only way to reconcile the hard and soft branches of Leibnizian dialectic