

LEIBNIZ AND STRAWSON ON PERSPECTIVISM

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Abstract: *The present article fathoms the difficulties as well as the beauty behind Leibnizian perspectivism, depicting the somewhat odd, yet highly elegant and influential relation between particular substances and the universal picture in which they are bound to fit. Moreover, it discusses several fundamental objections relayed via Strawson's interpretational perspective, as well as their suspected flaws.*

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From Leibniz's very standpoint, the universal goodness, which is fully consistent with an ontological superiority wrapped around both, notional completeness and pre-established harmony, amounts to a sound logical deduction inside a sound reasoning pattern. As long as the harmonic intertwinement, built upon the reflection of the whole in every individual part, functions as the prime engine of existential coherence, it also guarantees the completion of necessity-oriented contingency. This is why, looking through an existential lens of this sort, we see the justified occurrence of something rather than some other, a process which amounts to the occurrence of the best there is and will ever be. The full potential of the universal equation is thus revealed inside any and every occurrence.

Furthermore, one might even say that the very universal structure of the best possible world, deductible in itself from a kind of harmonic fabric derived, in its turn, from this magnificent monadic property of reflecting the universal image, is nothing but the shape and number – that is the product – of particulars. Should this assertion hold in itself, it would surely not be too revolutionary, as long as all monads' capacity to mimic the world would match the particulars' capacity to recognize, mimic, and ultimately replicate universality. As far as the implications of a universally-expanded spirit go (which, from where I stand, is somewhat similar, as product, to Spinoza's substantialism), we can assume they would have come in both contrast and accord with Leibniz's ideas regarding the existence of a particular soul. But the intent behind Leibniz's general project would surely request validation by means of the rightful placing in context of a certain desire for particularly-oriented existence. The fact is that, throughout successive build-ups, the 17th century held the key to a much successful reorientation from a universally-binding existence to the newest particular exigencies, and it did so by means of denouncing the former depreciative aura that had systematically been associated with *diversity*. The retracting of such a distrustful bond made room for

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the possibility that particulars be recognized as fulfilling any and all requirements associated with knowledge and existence. It is true that some kind of a profound paradigm came to be reverted, but it is no less true that the newborn paradigm was to be spread throughout cognitive and existential structures as if it were no different from the former one. Furthermore, an active relationship between the two was to be expected. Therefore, it would be within our reach to presuppose that having been kept for so long under the seal of censorship and dismissal, diversity itself, by means of a historical natural adverse reaction, was bound to seek redemption and recognition, if not centrality within thought patterns, by means of building up a certain ontological system centered on individuality. In other words, the intense desire of “rebuilding” metaphysics under a different “methodological program” could have very well resided in a somewhat straightforward reaction to philosophy’s linear and almost single-minded historical path.

By postulating monadic existence as individuality’s structural pattern, Leibniz follows up on a similar desire. If we choose to put forth an adversarial interpretive hypothesis, we might envision, for instance, the artificiality of the whole reflectional ontological maneuver by means of which he manages the *post-factum* reconciliation of the universal with particular existence. In this respect, such an artifice would not represent solely the premise for the deduction of a universal harmonic structure, but also the representation of the habitat between generality and specificity, universe and monads, as an accurate image of the pre-established harmony. The expression attached to the ontological cohabitation would, by extension, and through a process of interpretive dilatation, impersonate the possibility of expanding the existential mechanism to extra-ontological realms. Such a pretention may be satisfied when studying the equivalences between metaphysics, on the one hand, and the social-political dimension, on the other – a process partially conducted within my doctoral thesis – in relation to both the 17th century context of a formally-inaugurated modernism, and the social sciences paradigm. However, as far as the universal-particular relation goes, metaphysics works under a distinct dynamics. Within it, we ought to bring forward and linger on a set of consequences derived from compossibility itself, also depicting the relation between universal structures and particular instances.

Here it follows: if each and every simple substance mirrors the whole universe in itself, than should it not stand to reason that it also reflects any of the actual particular substances that do comprise the universe as a whole? And, furthermore: should it not also stand to reason that, in doing so, it also reflects itself as active part of the compossibility scheme? And then, would not that substantial self be subject to the further reflection in itself of a universe deconstructed in its initial pieces, from which in turn that very self would be mirrored in itself, as part of the reflection game; and so on, *ad infinitum*.¹

¹ This somewhat mimics, by extrapolation, Windelband’s objection (see Wilhelm Windelband, *A History of Philosophy*, New York: The MacMillian Company, 1954, p. 423) to Leibnizian perspectivism, one in which he argues that mutual representation is devoid of real content and that it is strictly phenomenalistic (see also Lawrence H. Starkey, *The Inherence of Particles in Universe*, of

Therefore, does not the reflection of the whole within monads (by means of some intrinsic monadic capacity) make room for the possibility that any and all parts of the reflected whole be in turn reflected inside the reflector? And, of course, even itself, as part of the given reflected parts? This is, probably, also connected to the fact that, as long as the whole is subject to division, the anti-universalist interpretive direction would take the opportunity to make the argument that, as devoid of unitary and actual existence as it can be, the whole would simply cease to exist absent of the parts to be comprised from. All in all, the problem in connection to the reflection of any of the particular monadic building blocks of the whole in some other monad, found in a coordination ratio to the universe itself, is representative of the ontological difficulty of preserving a sound relationship between universality and its particular instances. We can imagine a system **T** comprised from a multitude of elements, such as **t₁**, **t₂** to **t_n**, where **x** stands for the simple substance within the system.

$$\mathbf{T} = \{\mathbf{t}_1, \mathbf{t}_2 \dots \mathbf{t}_n\}$$

$$\mathbf{T}(\mathbf{x})$$

The relation between substance and system can be unfolded in its comprising parts, to such an extent that it would generate subordinate relations (or sub-relations), as it follows:

$$\mathbf{t}_1(\mathbf{x}) \ \& \ \mathbf{t}_2(\mathbf{x}) \ \& \ \mathbf{t}_n(\mathbf{x})$$

The three subordinate relations to the simple substance **x** give meaning to the ratio between the same substance **x** and **T** (as inclusion of all possible instances within the system). This particular kind of built-in multi-layered typology represents a systemic consequence, as well as the effect of depicting the universe as a network of elements. In truth, most of the above-stated consequences could be readily dismissed should Leibniz's whole be regarded as exceeding mere composition. In response to that, we should, therefore, ask ourselves whether or not – and if so, to what extent – does Leibniz appear to suggest that it is possible to depict the universal whole as reducible to its unfolding in various compositional parts (substances), absent of which the universe itself would cease to exist other than reflected. On the other hand, it would seem that the reflected universe is equivalent to some sort of particular representation inside the reflection-capable substance, and that seen as such it actually transcends its construction from combined substances becoming more of an indivisible whole. Beyond substantial combination, we can hardly talk about a realistic perspective of the world, at least not as long as each and every monad tends to mirror a somewhat personal universality in itself, as well as its own relations to substances, seen as parts of the reflected whole. At limit, we can state that there are as many universes as there are actual monads, even if solely by

means of the countless expressed perspectives. This, of course, does not necessarily put the veridicality of the existing world in question (maybe only its objectivity claim), but rather gives shape to the debates surrounding new relational typologies attached to the very idea of particular perspective. It would, therefore, seem that the typological specificity found in Leibniz's system is responsible for understanding and depicting collectiveness as means of communication amongst parts, while each and every systemic component – judged and valued in itself no matter its meaning, quantity or quality – self-sufficiently exists on its own. And, as long as the whole makes communication between part (that is, substance) and universe possible, it does seem on occasion to be devoid of anything except reflection within monadic structures, thus lacking autonomy and systemic unity. Besides, the only instance in which the whole appears to expand to something more than a sequence of monads and a symbolic existence at best, is the very moment of reflection when it receives some kind of magical property capable of turning its abstract nature into something recognizable. This does not mean that the monadic reflexive dynamics is bereft of its very own difficulties. The individual existence screams for an explanation regarding an individual typology: for instance, what Leibniz would call the identity of indiscernibles². And Leibnizian perspectivism will expand the argumentation to the point in which individuals will also be distinguishable by means of the perspective attached to their reflexive structures. The problem is that these types of universalistic projection within monads (that may be regarded as worldly “position”, as well as projection relative to “position”) may not guarantee at all the refutation of the *solo numero* differentiation amongst individuals. It is true that both, substantial completeness concept and the Leibnizian use of the identity principle secure the need for the individual to receive the big picture in itself. But conversely, such a reflection does not seem to safeguard the individuals' uniqueness. In this regard, the perceptual limitation argument, as well as the symmetrical or repetitive universe idea constitute serious objections to a sound correlation between reflexive multiplicity and metaphysical unity.³ Such a problem could be corrected by means of assuming the lack of a shared space with projective value within monads; and furthermore, ontological uniqueness would be reinstated through the transgression towards an internal, quasi-mental space, irreducible to content-related confusions.⁴

Nevertheless, we feel that, however representative as depicting the actual difficulties of a monads-universe relation, these objections are founded on two erroneous assumptions: 1. that monadic perspective is analogous to spatiality, and that, therefore, Leibnizian uniqueness by means of points of view would represent actual and quantitatively bound perspectives⁵; 2. that whatever the inconsistency behind the relation between spatial and non-spatial, it can be

² See Gerhardt, IV, 433; and cf. *Monad.*, sec. 9.

³ See P. F. Strawson's objections (the “chessboard” example etc.) in *Individuals: An Essay in Descriptive Metaphysics*, New York: Routledge, 1993, pp. 122-123.

⁴ See this solution as reinterpretation of the concept of “space” in *ibid.* pp. 123-124.

⁵ In particular, Strawson's proposal to a somewhat literal interpretation of the perspective concept, by examining the particular point of view as a “spatially extended scene” – see *ibid.* p. 121.

solved notionally by the very amendment of space or spatial typology⁶, which would actually put the core of monadic uniqueness in the position to rely on something unspecific to its essence. In a way, this last objection to Strawson's own objection will find itself in correlation to another of his objections regarding the analogy between monad and consciousness: that is the overlapping of those two (monads and consciousnesses⁷), proposal which is in fact based on an idea regarding some immaterial foundations of a material world.

For such an observation to be thoroughly included in the system, we submit that it would bring about the dissolution of the identity of indiscernibles principle, and we shall presently investigate this claim. The identity principle will be subject to change and, moreover, based on its inner necessity to preserve ontological unity and uniqueness at all cost, the system itself will require some other foundation. But which one? And how does this newfound basis influence individual uniqueness when confronted with the idea of a symmetrical or repetitive world?

The concerned principle involves *theo*-logical intervention and setting – which is consistent with a fully developed necessity of historical⁸ Leibnizianism to activate universal intelligibility by means of theological foundations⁹. Therefore, the correction to Strawson's expressed difficulty regarding the lack of monadic uniqueness by means of a possibly symmetrical or repetitive universe can exclusively be met by postulating that the specificity of monadic perspectives is regulated by the fact that God does not wish for a symmetric, repetitive or duplicated world. But however valid in itself, such a correction will utterly destroy the logical structure of the identity of indiscernibles principle, reshaping the entire system in relation to some theological basis attached to the monads-universe relationship. On the other hand, surpassing the substantial identity logic, we see that its transformation in some form of theological reign is somewhat attachable to the anti-physicalist status of monadic substance. For the employment of the very essence of any theological foundation is just another attempt at compensating the lack of spatial-temporal grounds of Leibnizian entities. Thus, the correlative overlapping of both theological and physical layers is the key to Strawson's refusal¹⁰ to accept Leibnizianism as ontology of particulars. The foreseen solution to the false particulars issue lies with assuming a universalist-conceptualist¹¹ status of monadic substances, which become from

⁶ *Ibid.* p.124.

⁷ "Why should there not be an indefinitely number of consciousnesses or quasi-consciousnesses 'at', or rather with, the *same* point of view?" – *ibid.* p. 125.

⁸ See Strawson's distinction between an actual-historical Leibniz and a possible one, as well as his decision to favor the latter, which he regards as fully complementary to the former, but nevertheless distinct from historical reality – *ibid.* p. 117.

⁹ See Jean-Gerard Rossi, *La th orie monadique de Leibniz: ontologie de particuliers ou ontologie d'universels? – sur le Leibniz de Strawson*, in Leibniz-Kongress, IV, p. 925.

¹⁰ "I shall not allow this alternative to count as an exception to my principle that an ontology which does not allow for either spatial or temporal entities cannot allow for particulars at all. An ontology which could be taken seriously only by God is not to count as a possible ontology" – Strawson, p. 126.

¹¹ See the full demonstration in *ibid.* pp. 126-131.

conceptual carriers, concepts themselves¹². This reasserts the logical completeness of the identity of indiscernibles, and allows for differentiation amongst complete concepts, however partially overlapped; also, the universalistic solution renders intelligibility to the claim that monads be non-spatial and non-temporal entities, ensuring veridical inclusion on the predicate-subject axis;¹³ but at the same time it moves away from the universalistic typology of historical Leibnizianism¹⁴.

Such benefits drawn from a coherent system are surely indisputable and they represent the expression of shifting amongst types of categorial affiliation. While any particular perspective generates inner contradictions, a sound universalistic interpretation seems to render them inert, also contributing to the revalidation of a coherence that was pretty much lost with the decision to perceive the world fragmentarily. On the other hand, Strawson's proposal of relocating the categorial framework seems to have been founded on an erroneous premise: the idea that the ontological typologies attached to particular and universal approaches should be viewed as adversarial or competitive. That such a proposition is somewhat troubling and counterproductive to Leibnizian philosophy may be shown in relation to the issue behind the preservation of substantial plurality; we also see that universals do not seem to make their contribution to solving the problem assumed to have been brought on stage by asserting particular existence, unless we decide to force on the entire system a huge reduction to conceptual relations and sets.¹⁵ And while it is true that this amounts more to an objection of a certain method, we also feel that it casts a significant shadow of doubt on the relationship between fractured particulars and emerging universals. To this regard, we submit that the shortcomings of a world governed by the former are *not* necessarily to be solved simply by means of shifting towards a universalistic paradigm.

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¹² „We shall instead think of the basic individuals of the system as these complete notions, these concepts, themselves” – *ibid.* 126-127. See also Rossi's explanation, pp. 925-926.

¹³ See Strawson, p. 127.

¹⁴ See Rossi, p. 926.

¹⁵ See Strawson, p. 131.