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Leibniz and the Cartesian Epistemology

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Leibniz, like some of the most important thinkers of the seventeenth century (e.g. Arnauld, Malebranche, and Spinoza), is commonly considered a Cartesian philosopher. However, in many of his works, Leibniz was severely critical of Descartes' philosophy. Leibniz often worked to refute the main arguments and theses put forward by Rene Descartes' *Meditations on First Philosophy*. In the *Animadversiones ad partes generales Principiorum Cartesianorum*, for example, Leibniz criticizes Descartes' methodology, metaphysics, and physics. Accordingly, in the face of all the criticisms Leibniz has made about the Cartesian philosophy, we may ask why we should still place Leibniz among the followers of Descartes.[1]

In spite of all the critiques, I believe that Leibniz is without doubt a true Cartesian in epistemological issues.[2] Even though neither Descartes nor Leibniz wrote books on specifically epistemological issues, both had epistemological convictions that, we shall see, are quite similar. Furthermore, in the preface to his *New Essays of Human Understanding*, Leibniz claims that he has "decided to comment on [Locke's *An Essay Concerning Human*

[1] See Belaval for a comprehensive study of Leibniz's critiques of Descartes.

[2] Since this paper is rather concerned with "psychological" than "logical" questions, by "epistemological issues" we mean "theory of perception," "theory of ideas," and "innateness."

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Understanding], because I have thought at length about most of the topics it deals with" (*Opera philosophica* 194). At first sight, it seems that Leibniz occupied himself with investigating logical, metaphysical, and theological matters above all. It is hard to imagine that he might have troubled himself with epistemological issues before the publication of Locke's *Essay*. In truth, the publication of Locke's *Essay* gave Leibniz the opportunity to gather his epistemological opinions in a single work dedicated to the subject. In what follows, we shall see that Leibniz did indeed have an epistemological doctrine, but his conceptions are not new at all. I argue that the epistemological doctrine Leibniz presents in his New Essays is Cartesian.

In the first pages of the *New Essays*, as he makes clear the nature of the question which opposes him to Locke, Leibniz put forwards an epistemological hypothesis that seems distinctly Cartesian:

> Our disagreements concern points of some importance. There is the question whether the soul in itself is completely blank like a page on which nothing has yet been written (*tabula rasa*); everything inscribed on it comes solely from the senses and experience, as Aristotle and Locke maintain; or whether the soul inherently contains the sources of various notions and doctrines; none of these comes from external objects, whose only role is to rouse up the notions and doctrines on suitable occasions, as Plato and I hold. (*Opera philosophica* 194)

Although Leibniz suggests that Plato might have provided the inspiration for his innateness, we should not be misled by this hint. Plato was the first and the most famous proponent of innateness in the entire history of philosophy. However, the passage quoted above brings to light a distinctive element which Leibniz could not have found in the epistemology of the pupil of Socrates, but just in the epistemology of Descartes. In his theory of perception, Descartes stresses the decisive role played by external factors in the process of cognition, which allows him to build a dispositional theory of innateness. Descartes clearly holds this theory in a short text called *Notae in Programma Quoddam* (*Comments on a Certain Broadsheet*) aimed to refute the opinions of a former Cartesian.[3] There he explains that perception arises not because "these external things transmitted the ideas themselves to our minds through the organs of sense, but because they transmitted something which gave the mind occasion to form these ideas, by means of an innate faculty, at this time rather than at another" (Descartes 8:359).

[3] The author of the poster was Henricus Regius, professor of medicine at the University of Utrecht.

Both Leibniz and Descartes claim that the mind is endowed with innate ideas which simply wait for the 'suitable occasion' to become conscious to the mind. Thus, Leibniz seems to tacitly acquiesce to the doctrine of dispositional innateness put forward by Descartes. By deepening our analysis of these texts, we shall be able to show how Leibniz is in agreement with the Cartesian epistemology.

Leibniz and Descartes both employ the term "occasion" to assert that the circumstances in which sensible perception occurs must be taken into consideration in order to explain the process of cognition. They do not believe that experience alone can account for the entire process of cognition; rather, they stress that the mind needs some help from external objects in order to reach an intellectual representation of them through its inborn ideas. These assumptions suggest that both philosophers—and not only Leibniz, as it is commonly admitted—have adopted a dispositional theory of innateness. This lays the groundwork for the hypothesis that Leibniz might have borrowed his doctrine of dispositional knowledge from Descartes. The first step to prove that hypothesis is to demonstrate that, in the text quoted above, the Cartesian verb *efformandas* (Latin, "to form") has the same meaning and the same epistemological function of the Leibnizian verb *réveillent* (French, "to rouse up"). The clue to solving this problem can be found in the revolutionary theory of perception that Descartes worked out to overcome the Scholastic empiricism.

According to Scholastics, particularly Saint Thomas Aquinas, the human mind is a tabula rasa. So all human knowledge must be issued from sensory experience.[4] Like many philosophers until the seventeenth century—until Descartes, I should say—Aquinas is a kind of empiricist. In his view, our knowledge depends on the fact that we are sensing beings. Aquinas vehemently asserts that "the intellect knows nothing but what it receives from the senses" (I, q. 78, a. 4). Therefore, the only possible way of providing the intellect with concepts is taking them from the senses or abstracting them through the senses. In Scholastic jargon, this process of abstraction was accomplished by the *intellectus agens* (active intellect), which was defined as "the power of the intellect that makes things actually intelligible, by abstraction of the species from material conditions" (Aquinas I, q. 79, a. 3). Roughly speaking, this process of abstraction was understood as a transaction in which the *forma* or *species sensibilis* (sensible form or species) was conveyed from the perceived object to the senses of the perceiver. Thus,

[4]Although Locke hated the formalism of Scholastic thought, in putting forward his empirical theory of knowledge, he follows the same peripatetic principles.

one and the same forma or species sensibilis was received by the knowing subject through the sense organs. After being abstracted by the active intellect, they arrive at the *intellectus possibilis* (possible intellect), where they become *phastamata* or *intelligibilia* (intellectual species). Aquinas stresses the importance of this process for the acquisition of knowledge: "It is impossible for our intellect to understand anything actually, except by turning to the phantasms [abstract, intellectual forms]" (I, q. 84, a. 7). Thus, the Scholastic theory of perception clearly postulates that there is something coming from the object, which literally enters the mind—the *forma* or *species sensibilis*—in order to produce perception, sensation, and so on.

From Descartes' standpoint, on the contrary, it is impossible that anything extended literally enters the mind as the Scholastic theory seems to require. According to him, "there is no need to assume that something material passes from the objects to our eyes to make us see colors and light, nor even that there is anything in these objects which is similar to the ideas or the sensations that we have of them" (Descartes 6:85). Leibniz, even though he did not speak it out, took Descartes' side in fighting against the Scholastic theory of perception. In his quite Cartesian words, "nothing naturally enters our mind from outside; and it is a bad habit of ours to think of our soul as receiving messenger species, or as if it had doors and windows" (*Opera philosophica* 828). He went so far as to admit that "this fits in with my principles" (*Opera philosophica* 828).[5] The admission of such a theory of perception not only denies that the soul is a *tabula rasa*, as Aristotle, the Scholastics, and Locke held, but it also assigns the status of innateness to all the ideas, including sensory ones.

That Leibniz avows a Cartesian theory of perception is further supported by the possibility of understanding two of the most fundamental notions of Leibniz's philosophy as a development of Descartes' theory of perception. These are the ontological principles of Leibniz's philosophy: the individual substance and the monad. Leibniz asserts that the individual substance is a complete notion, which means that it contains all its predicates within itself (*Opera philosophica* 819). Instead of receiving its ideas, sensations and perceptions from external sources, the individual substance by definition excludes all kinds of empirical and sensory impressions, "for it expresses (though confusedly) everything that happens in the universe—past, present, and future—and this is a little like infinite perception or knowledge" (*Opera philosophica* 820). Furthermore, in his *Monadology* (1714), written almost thirty years after his *Discourse on Metaphysics* (1686), Leibniz

[5] We shall see below that these "principles" are the individual substance and the monad.

reminds us of what he had already said regarding his undeniable—though not acknowledged—acquiescence to the Cartesian theory of perception: "Monads have no windows through which anything could enter or leave. Accidents cannot be separated from substances or go about outside of them, as the sensible species of the Scholastics used to do" (*Opera philosophica* 705). These Leibnizian statements make clear that he not only has a close tie to Descartes' epistemology, but that the Cartesian theory of perception has also underpinned his ontological principles.

Having established that our ideas cannot have an external source, as required by Descartes' theory of perception, it remains to solve the problem of how the human mind is provided with knowledge. The most obvious way to tackle this problem is to postulate a theory of innate ideas. According to the theory of innate ideas, the human soul is already furnished with all the primitive elements which make it able to get knowledge without relying on the sensible world. In this innatist framework, ideas become inborn properties of the mind. That is what Leibniz tells us when he asserts that "first of all, by idea we understand something which is in our mind" (*Sämtliche Schriften* 1369). The idea is in our mind in the sense that it was not transmitted from any empirical object or phenomenon to the soul; it was born in the mind. That is why Leibniz takes Plato's side in his quarrel with the more Aristotelian Locke in the *New Essays*. Since Plato was the most prominent champion of innateness in the history of philosophy, it is natural that Leibniz sees him as the model of his own innatist doctrine. Nonetheless, I aim to show that the Leibnizian dispositional innateness stands as a genuine development of the Cartesian theory of ideas. More exactly, we intend to demonstrate that Leibniz's epistemology is heir to the material and objective notions of idea conceived by Descartes. But before exposing his own theory, Leibniz had to manage the debate between Malebranche and Arnauld over the true nature of ideas in Descartes' view.

In the preface to the *Meditations*, Descartes puts forward two distinct, though complementary, ways in which the term "idea" could be understood. According to him, "it may either be taken materially (*materialiter*), as an act of my understanding . . . or it may be taken objectively (*objective*) as the thing which is represented by this act" (Descartes 7:7). Malebranche took up the objective sense of idea in his *Search after Truth* (1674). In direct opposition to Malebranche's notion of idea, Arnauld, in his *On True and False Ideas* (1683), held that "idea" should be understood rather as an act or an operation of the thought. Since each had emphasized just one aspect of the notion of idea as defined by Descartes, neither Malebranche nor Arnauld were able to grasp the true meaning of the Cartesian theory of ideas. It was Leibniz, an eyewitness of the long controversy between Arnauld and Malebranche, who definitively solved the problem of how the

Cartesian theory of ideas should be understood. In fact, the Leibnizian dispositional innateness is an outcome of his response to that debate, which was expressed under the form of an *Aufhebung* (synthesis) of the objective notion of idea espoused by Malebranche and the material notion of idea held by Arnauld.

In paragraph 26 of his *Discourse on Metaphysics*, before giving his own account, Leibniz describes Arnauld's and Malebranche's conceptions of idea:

> Some people [i.e. Arnauld] take an idea to be a form or differentia of our thought; so that we have the idea in our mind only when we are thinking of it, and whenever we think of it again, we have different but similar ideas of the same thing. Others [i.e. Malebranche], however, seem to take an idea to be the immediate object of a thought, or to be some kind of permanent form, which continues to exist even when we are not contemplating it. (*Opera philosophica* 828)

Having briefly sketched the opinions on the nature of ideas of the two opponents, Leibniz is then ready to advance his own understanding of the subject in order to solve the problems he thought he had found in Malebranche's and Arnauld's interpretations of Descartes' theory of ideas. First, he agrees with Arnauld in taking an idea to be an active process of the mind: "Our soul always possesses the ability to represent to itself any nature or form when the occasion for thinking of it arises" (*Opera philosophica* 828). This statement means that Leibniz accepts the material sense of idea as an act or operation of the soul held by Arnauld. Notwithstanding his general agreement with Arnauld's notion of idea, it does not entail that Leibniz thinks that Malebranche has adopted the false or wrong notion of idea. On the contrary, Leibniz considers that Malebranche is absolutely right in taking an idea to be an objective being endowed with real existence. For this reason, Leibniz says that "this ability of our soul, when it expresses some nature, form, or essence, is properly called an idea of the thing; and it is in us and is always in us whether or not we are thinking of the thing" (*Opera philosophica* 828).

According to Leibniz, Malebranche was correct because ideas are essential properties of the soul and therefore must be a permanent form of the thought. Thus, idea could not be just a mental event which would disappear as soon as the perception of the thing that gave rise to it, as suggested by Arnauld's material conception of idea. In Malebranche's view, idea was a true being. Nonetheless, there was a question against which both Arnauld and Malebranche fought alongside: the question of innate ideas. Malebranche claimed that all ideas were properties of God's intellect, so

they could in no way be inborn properties of the human mind. That is why Malebranche claims that we see external things by means of ideas in God. Arnauld, in turn, asserted that ideas were nothing but 'modifications' of the thought and did not need to postulate innate ideas to account for the process of cognition.

For Leibniz, on the contrary, the innateness theory was a true philosophical principle. In accordance with Descartes' theory of perception, the notions of individual substance and monad were built on the assumption that they do not receive any sensory impressions from outside. Leibniz had two tasks to accomplish concerning Arnauld's and Malebranche's theories of cognition: the first one was to correct their mistaken interpretations of the Cartesian theory of ideas. The second one was to defend the doctrine of innate ideas from their attacks—before defending it from Locke's empirical standpoint. The Leibnizian response to these problems is a sort of synthesis of the material and the objective notions of ideas as understood by Arnauld and Malebranche. The achievement of this synthesis represent a step back towards the theory of ideas described by Descartes in the preface to the *Meditations*. Leibniz thought that Descartes was not clear in his definition of idea. That was the reason why the controversy Arnauld-Malebranche could arise. It was the time for him to "establish the distinctions and criteria that relate to ideas and knowledge" (*Opera philosophica* 79).

In paragraph 26 of the *Discourse on Metaphysics*, Leibniz explains his own conception of knowledge and ideas. First, like Plato, he claims that "our soul has virtual knowledge of all things" (*Opera philosophica* 828). If the soul possesses virtually all knowledge, then the ideas which represent it must also exist virtually in the soul. By "virtual" Leibniz means that the knowledge and its representation—the ideas—have always been in the soul, even though we are not conscious of it all the time, even though we have not been conscious of it yet. Whatever may happen, the idea remains a real, representational being which exists in the soul. Here, Leibniz is not only stressing the fact that the idea is an inborn entity in the mind, but also that the idea is an ontologically existent being. In this sense, he partially agrees with Malebranche's objective notion of idea (*Opera philosophica* 81). On the other hand, from Leibniz's statement that the soul "needs only to have its attention (*animadversion*) drawn to them to grasp the truths," we can infer that Arnauld's material notion of idea also plays a role in Leibniz's theory of ideas (*Opera philosophica* 828). In fact, what Leibniz calls "*animadversion*" is the operation or act performed by the soul in order to render its innate ideas conscious to the mind. In other words, the material notion of idea, or animadversion, is responsible for rousing up the virtual knowledge contained in the representational content of the objective idea.

If these considerations are right, we may state that Leibniz's dispositional innateness originates from his response to the Cartesian controversy between Arnauld and Malebranche over the nature of ideas. Leibniz arrived at this outcome by making a synthesis of the Cartesian material and objective notions of idea espoused by Arnauld and Malebranche. This analysis of Leibniz's epistemology brings to light how powerful the Cartesian influence was on it. In fact, the innateness theory worked out by Leibniz could have been established by Descartes himself; however, Descartes' research interests pushed him to study metaphysics and science rather than epistemology. We have seen above that even the ontological principles of Leibniz's philosophy—the individual substance and the monad—were based on Descartes' theory of perception, which opened the door to his innateness. Moreover, his deliberate intervention in the Arnauld-Malebranche controversy has reinforced his epistemological ties with Descartes. In a sense, Leibniz's position in this debate can be understood as a return to Descartes' theory of ideas and innateness.

If we take a close look at the *New Essays on Human Understanding*, we can easily recognize the importance of these epistemological elements borrowed from Descartes in Leibniz's response to Locke's critique of innate ideas. We need to go no further than the preface to the *New Essays* to see Leibniz applying Descartes' theory of ideas in his defense of innateness against Locke. Leibniz says that innate ideas are imprinted on our minds as a block of marble "which is veined in a way that marks out the shape of Hercules rather than other shapes. . . . Hercules would be in a way innate in it, even though it would take a lot of work to expose the veins and to polish them into clarity" (*Opera philosophica* 196). In this metaphor, the objective notion of idea is represented by the virtual shape of Hercules in the block of marble. The block of marble, like the objective idea, has representational powers which may or may not be activated. Both the block of marble and the objective idea are potentially capable of representing something. This is due to a dispositional faculty inborn in them—a representational faculty. In both cases, this dispositional faculty of representation will remain in a state of inactivity unless some work is done. Whereas a sculptor is required to mold the block of marble into the shape of Hercules, the representational content contained in the objective idea needs the help of the material idea to become conscious to the mind. As an act or operation of the soul, the material idea performs the same task as the sculptor's chisel in the sense that they are employed in order to produce the representation of ideas and the representation of Hercules. It is thus that the material idea rouses up the virtual knowledge inborn in the mind. This virtual knowledge corresponds to the objective idea. The expressive power of the soul consists in its collaboration with the material idea.

This is what is meant by Leibniz's dispositional innateness. Leibniz relied on this doctrine to formulate his response to Locke's empirical attack on innate ideas. Leibniz, the anti-Cartesian philosopher *par excellence*, converted into a intransigent upholder of the Cartesian innateness. Leibniz borrowed his theory of perception and his theory of ideas from Descartes and built his dispositional innateness on them. This suggests that Descartes had all the raw-materials necessaries for constructing a dispositional theory of innate ideas of his own. Nonetheless, Descartes was never fully interested in problems of cognition and, for this reason, he did not develop a systematic theory of knowledge. It was Leibniz who systematized Descartes' theory of knowledge. That is why, concerning epistemological issues, Leibniz was a true Cartesian.

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