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“Another Case of illegitimate Backward Projection: Why Leibnizian Apperception is not (essentially) higher-order Perception in the *New Essays*”

- Abstract -

“Reading Leibniz teleologically, in terms of positions we know he will eventually take, has caused some to misunderstand his earlier writings, and in focusing on the anticipations of his later views, we have missed the complexities, not to mention the somewhat different positions that he actually took in earlier periods in his thought.” (Garber 2009, 300-301)

In this paper, I argue that Daniel Garber’s verdict concerning the interpretation of Leibniz’s conception of substance in his early and middle years applies to another classic topic of Leibniz scholarship, namely the interpretation of Leibniz’s notion of apperception in his *New Essays* (henceforth “*NE*”).

Part I

According to what I call “the standard account”, in the *NE* Leibniz did not only introduce the neologism “apperception” into French language, but also used it and the corresponding verb form “s’appercevoir” in a technical sense. According to this technical sense, apperceptions essentially involve or are even identical with acts of reflections.¹ The main motive for the standard account rests on an instance of what Garber calls the procedure of “[r]eading Leibniz teleologically”. This procedure is problematic because it involves backward projection, i.e., interpreting earlier texts in terms of later ones.

In his backward projection, Robert McRae assigns the position Leibniz describes in the later *PNG* and the *Monadology* (1714) more or less literally to the *NE* (1702-04). He claims that Leibniz conceptually identifies apperceptions with reflections in the *NE* (as he did, McRae says, in the later *PNG* and *Monadology*). However, this interpretation cannot be right for several reasons:

(1) A survey of the appearances of “apperception” and “s’appercevoir” in the *NE* reveals that Leibniz applies these terms in many contexts which do not allow for a reading of them in terms of reflection, i.e., in terms of self-ascriptions of perceptions or properties of the form “I perceive X” or “I am Y”.

(2) When Leibniz clarifies the perception-apperception distinction in *NE* 2.9.4, the context makes clear that Leibniz uses the verb “s’appercevoir” in the ordinary sense of “remarquer” and not in any technical sense like in the sense of reflection.

(3) Leibniz explicitly attributes apperceptions of external objects to animals, but unambiguously rejects the idea that animals possess the capacity of reflection in many texts in his late years.

Taking into consideration the latter animal problem, Mark Kulstad presents a revised version of the standard account resting on the idea that Leibniz tacitly distinguishes between simple and focused reflection. Kulstad claims that Leibniz’s denial of reflection to animals only concerns focused and not simple reflection. This allows Leibniz to attribute the capacity to animals to apperceive external things. But Kulstad’s suggested solution is not convincing:

¹ See Rescher, 1967 ch. 10; McRae 1976; Kulstad 1983; Kulstad 1991; Gennaro 1999; Simmons 2001, 54n44.

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(1) Kulstad's interpretation faces a straightforward problem: There is no textual evidence in favour of the fact that Leibniz distinguished between simple and focused reflection; but there is textual evidence that Leibniz does not draw a distinction of this kind.

(2) Kulstad's interpretation cannot do justice to the fact that Leibniz applies the term "apperception" also in contexts that do not seem to involve any kind of reflection. Moreover, this finding cannot be explained by saying that Leibniz used "apperception" ambiguously.

Part II

My own alternative account says that Leibniz uses the terms "s'appercevoir" and "apperception" in the ordinary sense of "remarquer" or, more seldomly, "connaitre" (see *Dictionnaire de l'Academie Francoise*, first printing from 1694). This interpretation solves the difficulties of the standard account:

(1) If Leibniz means noticing by "apperception", it is no surprise that he applies this term in many different contexts and with regard to many different objects: noticing just is a fairly general kind of mental act.

(2) Although reflection counts as apperception for Leibniz, it is not true that all apperceptions are or essentially involve reflections. There is no need to postulate an essential link between apperception and reflection. In particular, sensory apperception of external things, i.e. sensation, does not involve any reflective act. Accordingly, there is no problem for Leibniz to attribute apperceptions of external things and sensation to animals.

In the final section, I will address three objections to this alternative account of apperception in the *NE*: The first is related to passages in which it seems that Leibniz identifies apperception with reflection; the second concerns Leibniz's frequent talk of apperceptions of perceptions in the *NE*; and the third one deals with Leibniz's use of "apperception" in *PNG* §4 and *Monadology* §12.

References

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