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“Simmons on Leibniz on the Intentionality of Sensation”

In her 2001 paper, “Changing the Cartesian Mind: Leibniz on Sensation, Representation and Consciousness,”¹ Alison Simmons proposes an interpretation of Leibniz according to which sensations represent by resembling their intentional objects – motions in bodies. More specifically, Simmons gives an interpretation according to which Leibniz is a *strict resemblance theorist*: “Sensations represent physical motions by ‘presenting them [to the mind] just exactly as they are.’”² Taken at face value the suggestion may sound implausible. How could a sensation of the orange look of a basketball or the peppery taste of a steak *exactly resemble* any physical part of the ball or the steak? To a first and rough approximation, Simmons’ story unfolds as follows. Leibniz held that sensations are complexes of simpler, unconscious perceptions – *petite perceptions*. These simpler, unconscious perceptions each represent minute moving parts of the body sensed – e.g. a minute part of a basketball or a steak – by exactly resembling that moving part. Then, the explanation for the discrepancy between what sensations appear (to us) to represent – colors and tastes, for instance – and what they actually represent – bodily motions – is epistemological. The simple representations of micro-physical motions are, by hypothesis, unconscious, so of course their contents are not accessible to consciousness. Rather, we are consciously aware of complexes of these simple representations taken together. As such, sensations appear to us as confused complexes, lacking as we are the cognitive wherewithal to analyze them into their simple parts.

I propose, *contra* Simmons, that Leibniz is not committed to a strict resemblance account of the intentionality of sensations. As general point, Leibniz is straightforwardly liberal about the possible ways various media might represent, where by ‘liberal’ I mean that he openly allows for multiple species of representation. While some representations might express their objects by exactly resembling them, others might do so by bearing some other species of isomorphism to their objects. There is some strong textual evidence suggesting that Leibniz is similarly liberal when it comes more specifically to mental representation. Thus, we are left with at least two

¹ Simmons, A. (2001). “Changing the Cartesian Mind: Leibniz on Sensation, Representation, and Consciousness.” *The Philosophical Review*, Vol. 110, No. 1, pp. 31-75.

² Simmons (2001): 67.

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alternative interpretations to the one provided by Simmons, the one weaker, the other stronger. On the one hand, Leibniz apparently does not commit, explicitly or implicitly, to the strict resemblance account of sensation. There are pieces of text suggesting, in fact, that he was not committed to any particular theory of intentionality for sensation or for other kinds of mental representation. On the other hand, what relevant and revealing pieces of text there are support a stronger interpretation, according to which Leibniz is a *covariance theorist* about the representation relation for sensations. If so, it was Leibniz's position that sensations represent by being necessarily and asymmetrically correlated with their objects.