

Brian Glenney (Gordon College)

“Leibniz on Molyneux’s Question”

“I am no longer a Cartesian.” proclaimed Leibniz in the opening to his *New Essays Concerning Human Understanding*.¹ This suggested an unveiling of views on knowing and being not only distinct from Locke, the target of this work, but from Descartes. Central to this reveal was Leibniz’s position that ideas are neither image-based, as Locke seems to have held,² nor distinguished by conscious reflection, as Descartes claimed,³ but were rather representational expressions of external features of the world and distinguished by what they represent—by something external to the mind. As Alison Simmons has argued, what makes Leibniz’s theory of mind distinctive from other early modern philosophers is its unique account of representational content which is neither imagistic nor propositional, but rather based on a kind of mental modeling of non-mental objects.⁴

Leibniz’s account bases the relation between mental models and their non-mental counterparts on an intriguing theory of resemblance, “resemblance of a kind—not a perfect one which holds all the way through, but a resemblance in which one thing expresses another through some orderly relationship between them.”^{5,6} This ‘resemblance of a kind’ is based on structural mappings that the faculty of perception generates. Leibniz exemplified such mappings with geometrically corresponding shapes, “an ellipse, and even a parabola or hyperbola, has some resemblance to the circle of which it is a projection on a plane.”⁷ These geometrical shapes resemble each other by sharing, explained Leibniz, “a certain precise and natural relationship between what is projected and the projection which is made from it, with each point on the one corresponding through a certain relation with a point on the other.”⁸ Leibniz’s theory is not a resemblance of look, but of structure, but not just shape structures. “[T]he internal bodily motions and the ideas which represent them to the soul resemble the motions of the object

¹ *New Essays Concerning Human Understanding*, ed. by Peter Remnant and Jonathan Bennett (Cambridge. Hereafter NE. NE I.i, A/RB 71. Though Leibniz wrote the NE as a dialogue, I will be referring to his persona Theophilus as Leibniz.

² Leibniz, at least, interprets Locke to hold that sensory representations are imagistic. See NE: II.ix.8

³ The basis of Leibniz’s disagreement with Descartes’ point is his distinction between having a perception, and having awareness of a perception. See NE: Preface 53-56

⁴ “Changing the Cartesian Mind: Leibniz on Sensation, Representation and Consciousness”, Alison Simmons, *Philosophical Review* (2001) 110 (1):31-75.

⁵ NE II.viii.15, A/RB 131

⁶ What else *could* Leibniz claim after denying Lockean image-ideas while at the same time holding that all things, including the relation between a representation and its objects, are non-arbitrarily correlated, as “the author of things...does nothing without harmony and reason.” NE Preface 56. Similarly, what else can the philosopher of mind and perception say, knowing that representations are not imagistic, but that they enable us to identify, target, and direct our mind to their representees. For a nice discussion of one contemporary approach see *Things and Places: How the Mind Connects with the World* by Zenon W. Pylyshyn (MIT, 2009)

⁷ NE II.viii.15, A/RB 131

⁸ *ibid.*

Brian Glenney (Gordon College)

which cause the colour, the warmth, the pain, etc.”⁹ In other words, the structural properties of light projected onto the retina are mapped from the body to the mind, (what Leibniz called the “soul”), which produces a correlated sensory experience by modeling this structure in the mind.¹⁰ The structure of such sensory experiences and the light that caused them, Leibniz claims, are only opaquely understood, “because we cannot disentangle this multitude of minute impressions, whether in our soul or in our body or in what lies outside us.”¹¹

It is in the context of Leibniz’s peculiar resemblance thesis that Leibniz’s Lockean interlocutor poses Molyneux’s question:¹² whether a man born blind, familiar with cube and sphere shapes by touch, would be able to recognize at once a cube and sphere by sight alone were his sight restored. Leibniz’s affirmative reply was, I think, part of his general attempt to explain and apply his unique account of structural resemblance to a problem made popular by Locke’s *Essay*. More specifically, Molyneux’s question might have been taken by Leibniz to serve as a test-case for his account’s favored “shape projection” examples.¹³

Given the relevance of Molyneux’s question to Leibniz’s account of structural representations, I’ll argue against Gareth Evans and Robert McRae’s competing interpretations of Leibniz’s answer. Gareth Evans claimed that the blind man can rationally work out which shape is which by correlating heterogeneous concepts acquired by sight and touch. Conversely, Robert McRae read Leibniz’s answer as an instance of the mutual substitutability of homogenous concepts acquired by the senses. I argue that neither view has a correct understanding of Leibniz’s theory of representational content, which I interpret to be weakly homogenous across the senses, for they are not thoroughly substitutable as McRae would have it.

These arguments develop three crucial aspects of Leibniz’s account of perceptual representation: whether representations are a species of thought, whether representations

⁹ Leibniz later refers to Gerard Desargues, (NE II.ix.8) a French Mathematician who proved that certain geometrical features of shape were preserved by perspectival projections, This was a likely source of Leibniz’s own account of perception as expression. See Chris Swoyer’s paper, “Leibnizian Expression” in *Journal of the History of Philosophy* 33 (1) January 1995, pp. 65-99 for a detailed discussion.

¹⁰ *ibid.* Simmons’ gloss on this passage is helpful. “The problem here is not simply how something mental can resemble something corporeal, but how a sensation of *light* can be understood to present to the mind by resemblance *motions* in a body.” (15)

¹¹ *ibid.*

¹² Molyneux’s question appeared in the second (1694) and later editions of Locke’s *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding*, ed. Peter H. Niddich (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1979), hereafter referred to as “*Essay*”. Leibniz likely first read Molyneux’s question in Coste’s 1700 French translation, as his English copy was of the first edition (1690), which did not contain the question. See Ariew and Garber’s introduction of Leibniz’s “Preface to the New Essays,” p. 291 and the Cambridge edition of the *New Essays Concerning Human Understanding*, ed. by Peter Remnant and Jonathan Bennett, p. viii.

¹³ I agree with Robert McRae’s view that, “Leibniz is less interested in whether the man could solve the problem than in the exact correlations which must hold between the visual and tactile appearances...” *Leibniz: Perception, Apperception, and Thought* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1976) P.22

Brian Glenney (Gordon College)

are specific to their sensory modes of presentation (whether they are heterogeneous or not), and whether the structural representations are, for Leibniz, mutually interchangeable and able to perfectly stand in for each another. I'll conclude by presenting an account of Leibnizean structural representations that is applicable to Leibniz's answer to Molyneux's Question.