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## "Seeing is Believing. Leibniz on Perception and Will"

According to a commonly accepted view, the term 'perception' indicates that the mind is in a passive relation to its object, while the term 'concept' seems to refer to an action of the mind. The view pervades current debates on the topic, equally assumed by those who urge us to renounce empiricism insofar as experience is construed in terms of impressions and by those who propose a minimal empiricism based on the idea that ... 'representational content cannot be dualistically set over against the conceptual (Mc Dowell 1996: 3). By regarding perception as a passive act of the mind, they believe, we acknowledge the independence of reality constraining our thinking from outside.

The idea of the passivity of perception in modern philosophy, however, may be traced back to Descartes and his distinction between perceiving ideas and volitions. He also distinguished among three grades of sense activity, but only the second and the third grades are mental states; the second grade corresponds to the immediate mental result of nervous motion and the third to the judgment performed upon this mental content, occurring so quickly that we fail to notice its judicative nature (AT VII, 437-8). Although Spinoza has famously rejected the Cartesian theory of judgment and denied that the mind is passive, his view involved that an idea is, in a sense, a judgment since each assertion, whether false or true, involves an idea and the idea cannot be conceived apart from the affirmation. But the cost of resolving Descartes's dichotomies, whether between entertaining ideas and judging about them or between percepts and perceptual judgments, seems to require embracing monism.

For Leibniz, as for Spinoza before him, consciousness is not the essential feature of the mind but its ability to represent, which he designates by the technical term 'expression.' Perceptual representations of external objects can therefore be regarded as expressions. The Leibnizian doctrine evolved, I shall contend, from intensive reflection on the nature of the actions and passions of substances. The view, however, is not deprived of epistemological consequences. Firstly, representing seems to be an active state of the mind. Secondly, it is not evident that perception *qua* expression can put us in contact with physical objects. We commonly assume that perceiving is something we undergo, or, in Leibniz's vocabulary, a passion of the soul, while the objects of sense act on us. If, on the other hand, expressing

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the universe is what souls do, and substances do not interact, it is hard to see how perception understood in terms of expression can account for perceptual knowledge.

Expression in general is a dyadic relation in which one of the terms, the expressed, can be known through the other or the expression. If this is the case, there must be ‘a constant and regulated relation’ between what can be said about each of those terms. The related terms are not required to be similar, but a certain rule must obtain so that everything in one term can be referred to something in the other term of the relation (A6.4. N 78), for example, a map can express a geographical area as well as an equation can represent a geometrical figure (A6.4. 1371). Consequently, if perception is some sort of cognition, the perceptual representation is only a sign of the perceived object. What distinguishes perceptual expression is that the expression concentrates in a unity the manifold of the expressed. If the relation is to include *mental* representation, this feature must account for its intrinsic intentionality.

Now, in order to account for the distinction between perception and perceptual belief we must consider that sense perception is some degree of *distinct* perception (A6.4. 1625). A perceptual experience such as seeing a tree in front of a house seems to be a more specific kind of “perception.” Leibniz also claims that in the soul perceptual representation is united to a certain tendency to act according to this cognition. It can be argued that this follows from the fact that the soul is the principle of action of the substance (A6.4. 1508). Texts from the 1670s record that for human beings, the mental representation from which an endeavor to act follows is the judgment (A6. 4. 1410; 2. 493), which includes perceptual judgment (*ibid.*). The later doctrine correlates distinct perceptions to levels of activity but only an additional analysis can establish the relation between distinct perceptions and belief and how we can have distinct perception but confuse knowledge since distinct perception is not equivalent to distinct knowledge or knowledge by causes or reasons. In this way Leibniz is able to preserve the distinction between perception and perceptual judgment without being committed to some of the non-standard consequences of other theories.