

A Non-univocal Reading of Phenomenon in Leibniz

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1. Non-univocal Reading of Phenomenon and Body

Leibniz claims to have demonstrated the “phenomenality” of body, which is divisible and cannot be one *per se*, in accordance with the principle that one and being are convertible and a substance must have its own unity. Thus Leibniz declared that “it is only indivisible substances and their different states which are absolutely real” (G2, 119/L, 343). However, his theory of body has been interpreted in different ways, since what Leibniz means by that term is not clear. My proposed solution to the problem of ambiguity of the term “phenomenon” relies centrally upon the non-univocal reading of the notions of phenomenon and body. According to some commentators the term “phenomenon” has various meanings in the works of Leibniz (Adams 1994, pp.219-20 etc.). These scholars suggest that readers have to consider which notion of phenomenon should be applied in the context. We can understand the term “phenomenon” as either a representational content in our mind, or an external object which is phenomenal in that it does not have a substantial unity at all. Although for Leibniz the terms “body” and “matter” usually refer to an aggregate of substances, they sometimes refer to a mere representational content of a perceiver.¹

I think that it is possible, or rather persuasive, that we have our representational contents and perceive external objects at the same time. Suppose I am experiencing the brown color of a desk, which is my representational content. I can even assume that a desk is merely an aggregate of sensible qualities like the brown color and so on. But on the other hand, I can suppose that something exists outside of my mind and that my representational contents somehow correspond to it. And even supposing, as Leibniz actually does, that external substances cannot directly act upon our mind at all, the external entities that are perceived by our minds can still be intentional objects of our mental states.² In other words, it is possible to suppose that our mental states refer to the substances which exist outside of our minds. Also, within the framework of Leibniz’s metaphysics, the preestablished harmony among all the simple substances is realized by God. Given this harmony, our sensation always corresponds to external substances.

2. Two Notions of Phenomena

I shall next argue that we can find a plenty of textual evidences for my non-univocal interpretation. Let us begin by reminding ourselves of the ambiguity that exists in Leibniz’s notion of phenomenon. Leibniz’s descriptions of phenomena are various. It is, according to Leibniz, an experience (G1, 370)(1676), or appearance (G2, 112)(1687), or object of limited minds (G7, 563 (1705), cf. Adams 1994, p.219), or modification of a soul (G6, 591)(1711). Indeed, with respect to the usage of the term “phenomenon,” we must be careful not to confuse the

various meanings of it. Now we should provide the basis for the distinction of different concepts of phenomenon according to Leibniz's own terminology.

2.1. Internal Phenomenon

I will begin with internal phenomena, which is supposed to be the more familiar meaning of phenomena. By “internal phenomenon” I refer to the representational contents of minds or other simple substances, that are produced internally.

The soul was created from the beginning in such a way that everything that the body can offer, and is presented in it by virtue of the representative nature which was given to it with its being, for being produced at a designated point. After that by a series of thoughts and, so to speak, like by dreams (or rather internal phenomena) which are regulated and so veritable that they are foreseen with success; (G4, 477)

But even granting that everything takes place in us ordinarily just as it would in the case of bodily annihilation, that is, admitting that we ourselves always produce within us (as I in fact believe) or that God produces in us (as Theodore believes) internal phenomena without the body having any influence over us, must this necessarily involve external ideas? Is it not sufficient to hold that phenomena are simple new transitory modifications of our souls? (G6, 591/L, 626)

I want to begin my consideration of the evidence with the latter passage, since it seems to be relatively easier to read. According to the Cartesian theory, a mode (modus) or modification (modificatio) is something that can never exist without a substance.³ Sensation, idea and will cannot exist without a mind or soul, since all of these are modes of the mind. And Leibniz compares his own theory to Malebranche's, since Theodore is an advocate of Malebranche, and confirms that we produce all the experiences or internal phenomena within us.

At present we have seen the passages in which Leibniz uses the expression “internal phenomenon.” But it should be noted that Leibniz often had the notion of internal phenomenon in his mind even when he did not use this expression (G2, 270/L, 537; G4, 560/W, 247). Also, when Leibniz uses the metaphor of a dream, he usually considers internal phenomena. In the margin of a letter to Bourget, he says that material things are nothing but phenomena and they are just like dreams (G3, 567n). This point is made more explicitly in a letter to Remond of July 1714, where Leibniz observes:

The movements and the collisions are just appearances, but well-founded appearances which never deceive, and like exact and constant dreams. The movement is the phenomenon of change in accordance with position and time, and the body is the phenomenon which changes. (G3, 623)

Leibniz regards a body as an internal phenomenon in these passages, though it may not be the primary concept of body. It appears that the force or power of substance suffices for producing internal phenomena.

There is another, more fundamental way of understanding Leibniz here. Perceptions or modifications of the mind are like the terms of a series, whereas the mind itself or primitive force is like the law of the series (G2, 262/L, 533).⁴ This is a key to explain the relationship between internal phenomena and the soul. Through this causal force or engine, Leibniz states that he can experience all the events “as if there were things outside of [him], without actually being any” (G6, 589/L, 625).

2.2. External Phenomenon

In Leibniz’s theory one can easily find another notion of “phenomenon.” Indeed, in some passages we cannot take phenomena as internal (G2, 251; G2, 252 etc.). One of the typical examples is the following:

Further, there must be simple beings; otherwise there would not be composite beings or beings through aggregation, which are phenomena rather than substances, and exist by convention rather than by nature (that is, morally or rationally rather than physically) as Democrite put it. (G3, 69)

Here phenomena or beings through aggregation presuppose the existence of many simple beings or simple substances. Since they cannot be produced solely by one perceiver, they are clearly different from internal phenomena which a perceiver can produce by itself.⁵ Indeed, they are objects of perception that exist outside of the perceiver, that is, external objects (G4, 453) or external things (G5, 46 NE Preface etc.). And when Leibniz does draw attention to Democrite, he is always talking about this notion of phenomenon rather than an internal one: “since only simple things are true things, what remain are only entities by aggregation; to that extent they are phenomena, and as Democritus put it, exist by convention and not by nature” (G2, 252/AG, 177).⁶ Now we need a new concept of “phenomenon,” which refers to an aggregate of simple substances which exist outside of a perceiver.

The reason why infants do not form the thoughts of adults is that their thoughts are parallel to external phenomena in relation to their bodies. (G3, 465)

External phenomena are said to be “parallel” to what is internal to the soul of an infant i.e. their thoughts.⁷ The parallel relationship suggests that things correspond to each other and do not interact. When Leibniz talks about external things or objects, he emphasizes that they do not directly act upon a perceiver (G5, 46 NE Preface cf. G4, 453). Further, Leibniz uses the expression “phenomena which are outside of perceiving beings (phaenomena extra percipientia)” (G2, 485). Leibniz argues that a composed or corporeal substance will guarantee the reality of that kind of phenomena or body. In addition, Leibniz contrasts “internal appearance” with “external appearance” in the *New Essays* (G5, 220 NE 2.27.9; G5, 227 NE 2.27.23). From these texts we can understand that Leibniz regards

aggregates which are external to perceivers as phenomena. There are two reasons why Leibniz regards an aggregate of simple substances as “phenomenon.” First, a phenomenon is contrasted with a substance because an aggregate of simple substances cannot itself be a substance and therefore it is categorized as a non-substantial entity (G2, 126; G2, 252; G2, 256). The other reason is that the existence of an aggregate of simple substances in some sense depends upon a mind even though it is constituted by many external simple substances (G2, 256; G5, 133 NE 2.12.7 etc.).⁸ That is, each simple substance exists independently from a mind, but it is a mind that regards it as a member of an aggregate. Considering this dependence, Leibniz assigned the term “phenomenon” to an aggregate of simple substances.

Conclusion

I have argued that Leibniz’s notion of phenomenon should be understood in two ways: as a modification of a perceiver and as an aggregate of simple substances. The non-univocal interpretation of phenomenon that I offer is plausible.

Abbreviations

- A *Sämtliche Schriften und Briefe*. Herausgegeben von der Deutschen Akademie der Wissenschaften zu Berlin. Darmstadt, 1923 ff., Leipzig, 1938 ff., Berlin, 1950 ff. Cited by series, volume, and page.
- AG *G. W. Leibniz Philosophical Essays*. Trans. and eds. by Roger Ariew and Daniel Garber. Indianapolis: Hackett. 1989.
- AT *Oeuvres de Descartes*. Ed. Adam and P. Tannery. Paris: L. Cerf, 1897-1913. Cited by volume and page.
- DM *Discours de métaphysique*. Cited by section number.
- G *Die philosophischen Schriften von G. W. Leibniz*. Ed. C. I. Gerhardt. Berlin: Weidmann, 1875-1890. Reprint, Hildesheim: Georg Olms, 1978. Cited by volume and page.
- GM *Mathematische Schriften*. Ed. C. I. Gerhardt. Berlin: A. Asher, and Halle: H.W.Schmidt, 1849-1863. Cited by volume and page.
- L *G. W. Leibniz. Philosophical Papers and Letters*, 2nd. edn. Trans. and ed. by L. E. Loemker. Dordrecht: Reidel, 1969.
- LA *The Leibniz-Arnauld Correspondence*. Trans. and ed. by H. T. Mason, with an introduction by G. H. R. Parkinson. Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1967.
- M *Monadology*. Cited by section number.
- NE *Nouveaux Essais sur l'Entendement*. Cited by book, chapter, and section.
- RB *New Essays on Human Understanding* Trans. by P. Remnant and J. Bennett. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1982.
- W *G. W. Leibniz Philosophical Texts*. Trans. and eds. by R. S. Woolhouse and Richard Francks. New York: Oxford University Press. 1998.

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- _____. 1995b. "Metaphysics: The Late Period." In Jolley ed. *The Cambridge Companion to Leibniz*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

(Endnotes)

- ¹ Cf. G7, 322; G2, 270 (1704); G3, 623 (1714) etc.
- ² For a characterization of body and phenomenon as an intentional object, see Furth 1967, Adams 1983 and 1994. Of course, intentionality itself does not entail the existence of external substances (cf. Hoffman 1996, p.114).
- ³ Descartes himself usually uses the term "mode" in stead of "modification" (AT3, 504; AT7, 37; AT7 40; AT7, 73; AT7, 306 etc.). In the *Third Meditation*, he takes "a mode of my cogitation" as referring to a certain entity which exists in his mind and cannot exist independently (AT7, 40).
- ⁴ Historically, the expression "a law of series [lex seriei]" often meant a law to make up a sum of terms. But considering the context in which Leibniz uses this term, we should understand this law as one which produces particular terms rather than a sum of all terms.
- ⁵ Rutherford also refers to this passage in the letter to Bayle, though he does not translate it (Rutherford 1990b, p.19). He mentions it as evidence that Leibniz considers an aggregate of substances which cannot be reduced into perceptions.
- ⁶ When Leibniz refers to Democrite and examines the reality of body, he always takes a body as an aggregate of substances, since Democrite presupposed the existence of atoms and a body is a real aggregate of these ultimate unities. Also see G2, 101 (1687); G4, 472 (1695); G3, 69 (1702); G2, 282 (1706).
- ⁷ In that passage, external phenomena are contrasted with the infant's body. However, in some passages, even an organic body of a perceiver is assumed to be external for that perceiver, since in the comments on Bayle's dictionary, Leibniz states that "thought involves an actual external material object, the human body" (G4, 545/W, 236).
- ⁸ Notice that not all perceiving simple substances can construct an aggregate of other simple substances; some cannot have a mental operation to make up an aggregate. Leibniz clearly states that a mind (mens) gives a unity to an aggregate (G2, 256), and the unity which an aggregate of substances has is "a mental one" (G5, 133 NE 2.13.7/RB, 146). The term "mind" or "spirit" refers to a rational being. That is, animal souls and other simple substances cannot have a mental operation to consciously gather many external substances into one collection.

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