



THE UNIVERSITY *of* EDINBURGH

## Edinburgh Research Explorer

### Leibniz's mirrors

**Citation for published version:**

Phemister, P 2017, Leibniz's mirrors: Reflecting the past. in W Li, U Beckmann, S Erdner, E-M Errulat, J Herbst, H Iwasinski & S Noreik (eds), *Für Unser Glück oder Das Glück Anderer: Vorträge des X. Internationalen Leibniz-Kongresses Hannover 18-23 Juli 2016*. Georg Olms Verlag, Hildesheim, Zurich, New York, pp. 93-108, X Internationaler Leibniz Kongress, Hannover, Germany, 18/07/16.

**Link:**

[Link to publication record in Edinburgh Research Explorer](#)

**Document Version:**

Peer reviewed version

**Published In:**

Für Unser Glück oder Das Glück Anderer

**General rights**

Copyright for the publications made accessible via the Edinburgh Research Explorer is retained by the author(s) and / or other copyright owners and it is a condition of accessing these publications that users recognise and abide by the legal requirements associated with these rights.

**Take down policy**

The University of Edinburgh has made every reasonable effort to ensure that Edinburgh Research Explorer content complies with UK legislation. If you believe that the public display of this file breaches copyright please contact [openaccess@ed.ac.uk](mailto:openaccess@ed.ac.uk) providing details, and we will remove access to the work immediately and investigate your claim.



## Leibniz's Mirrors: Reflecting the Past

Pauline Phemister (Edinburgh)

My aim in this paper is to explore Leibniz's intriguing description of the monad as a living mirror of the universe.<sup>1</sup> I begin with a few brief observations on the status of mirrors in seventeenth century France, before embarking on a more detailed examination of the metaphor itself that focuses in particular on the ways in which mirrors represent space and time, the varying degrees of clarity and distinctness of their representations, and the ways in which mirrors reflect themselves. After arguing that all reflections are reflections upon the past and that self-reflection rests in part on the ability to perceive others different from the self, I turn finally to the question of how self-reflecting moral beings might best reflect the lives of others, and conclude by suggesting that self-reflecting beings have a moral imperative to love other self-reflecting beings, be they in the past, the present or the future, and to mirror the beauty of the world and its creator God as best they can.<sup>2</sup>

### 1. Seventeenth century mirrors

Michel Foucault's critique of signs in the French classical period may have given rise to the modern characterization of the period as the 'age of representation',<sup>3</sup>

---

<sup>1</sup> In references, I employ the standard abbreviations: AG = G. W. Leibniz: *Philosophical Essays*, ed. and transl. by R. Ariew and D. Garber, Indianapolis 1989; DSR = Id.: *De Summa Rerum: Metaphysical Papers, 1675-1676*, transl. by G. H. R. Parkinson, New Haven and London, 1992; L = Id.: *Philosophical Papers and Letters*, ed. and transl. by L. E. Loemker, Dordrecht 1969; LA = G. W. Leibniz/A. Arnauld: *The Leibniz-Arnauld Correspondence*, ed. and transl. by H. T. Mason, Manchester 1967; LTS = G. W. Leibniz: *Leibniz and the Two Sophies: The Philosophical Correspondence*, ed. and transl. by Lloyd Strickland, Toronto 2011; LV = G. W. Leibniz/ B. De Volder: *The Leibniz-De Volder Correspondence*, ed. and transl. by Paul Lodge, New Haven and London 2013; RB = G. W. Leibniz: *New Essays on Human Understanding*, ed. and transl. by Peter Remnant and Jonathan Bennett, Cambridge 1981.

<sup>2</sup> On Leibniz's use of metaphors more generally, the following studies are invaluable: Marcelo Dascal: *Leibniz. Language, Signs and Thought: a collection of essays*, Amsterdam & Philadelphia 1987; Cristina Marras: "On the Metaphorical Network of Leibniz's Philosophy", PhD Dissertation, Tel Aviv University 2003; Id.: "Leibniz and his metaphorical labyrinths: the manneristic and the unicursale", in: Domenic Berlioz and Frédéric Nef (eds.): *Leibniz et les puissances du langage*, Paris 2005, pp. 285-300; Id.: "The role of metaphor in Leibniz's epistemology", in: Marcelo Dascal (ed.): *Leibniz: What Kind of Rationalist?*, Dordrecht 2008, pp. 199-212; and Don Rutherford: "Metaphor and the Language of Philosophy", in D. Berlioz and F. Nef (eds.): *Leibniz et les puissances du langage*, pp. 271-284.

<sup>3</sup> Michel Foucault: *The Order of Things: Archaeology of the Human Sciences*, London 1970. Originally published as *Les Mots et les Choses: une archéologie des sciences humaines*, Paris 1966.

but Molière scholar Larry Norman suggests that the age might equally and perhaps more appropriately be labeled, the “age of the mirror”.<sup>4</sup> Of course, as Sabine Melchior-Bonnet observed in her groundbreaking history of the mirror, “Man has been interested in his own image since prehistoric times, using all sorts of expedients – from dark and shiny stones to pools of water – in order to catch his reflection”.<sup>5</sup> But even the standing or handheld, highly polished gold, silver or bronze metal mirrors of ancient Egyptian, Greek and Roman civilizations were as nothing in comparison to the glass mirrors produced in the early modern age. During the Renaissance, Venetian masters had developed techniques that vastly improved the production and quality of glass mirrors. They guarded the secrets of their success very closely, but in the seventeenth century, France broke into this monopolized market, founding the Royal Company of Glass and Mirrors and eventually succeeding in producing mirrors of reasonable quality at lower cost than their higher quality Venetian counterparts.<sup>6</sup> The net result of this industrious activity was that by the middle of the seventeenth century, mirrors were no longer luxuries of only the royals and aristocratic nobility. The lower prices and increased availability enabled the bourgeoisie and the mercantile classes to indulge in the craze for the new glass reflective surfaces. Mirrors by this time had become fashionable symbols of success and increasingly common in everyday life, no longer relegated to boudoirs and dressing rooms, but found above mantle-pieces in drawing rooms, between doorways and windows, as well as on jewelry, belts, and buttons. And so it was that when Leibniz visited Paris in the 1670s, he entered into a veritable ‘age of the mirror’. Mixing in the circles that he did, he would have found mirrors practically everywhere he turned.

## 2. *Monads as mirrors*

Reflections on the surfaces of the mirror are images or representations of the world outside of the mirror. It is this feature of the mirror that is uppermost in Leibniz’s mind when he introduces the mirror as a simile for the individual substance in the text of section 9 of the 1686 *Discourse on Metaphysics*. Like mirrors, each finite perceiving substance is a representative being, albeit one whose reflections mirror not only the whole universe, but also its creator, God: “every substance is like a complete world and like a mirror of God or of the whole universe”.<sup>7</sup> In later texts we find Leibniz abandoning the mirror as a mere simile in favour of the mirror as a metaphor. Repeatedly in letters to Remond, to Des Billettes, and to the Electress Sophie, he makes the point that “each simple substance is a mirror of the same universe”;<sup>8</sup> “[e]very soul is a mirror of the entire world”;<sup>9</sup> “a perpetual mirror” of the universe and as durable as the

---

<sup>4</sup> Larry Norman: *The Public Mirror: Molière and the social commerce of depiction*, Chicago 1999, p. 2.

<sup>5</sup> Sabine Melchior-Bonnet: *The Mirror: A History*, transl. by Katharine H. Jewett, London 2001, p. 9. First published as *Histoire du Miroir*, Paris 1994.

<sup>6</sup> Melchior-Bonnet, *The Mirror*, ch.2.

<sup>7</sup> A VI 4B, 1542/ AG 42.

<sup>8</sup> Leibniz to Remond, July 1714; GP III, 623.

<sup>9</sup> Leibniz to Des Billettes, 4/14 December 1696; GP VII, 452/ L 473.

universe itself;<sup>10</sup> and each a mirror of the universe “in its way”<sup>11</sup> or “according to its point of view”.<sup>12</sup> The metaphor is retained in writings from Leibniz’s final years, making its way into both the *Monadology*<sup>13</sup> and the *Principles of Nature and Grace*. In these texts, Leibniz is keen to emphasize the differences between ordinary souls and those capable of rational thought. Accordingly, in contrast to the opinion he expressed in the earlier *Discourse on Metaphysics* that every substance is “like a mirror of God”, in later writings, being “an image of the divinity” is presented as a feature that distinguishes reasonable souls from those that mirror only the works of God.<sup>14</sup>

With the shift from simile to metaphor in the 1690s, substances are no longer merely *like* mirrors: they have *become* mirrors. The introduction of the stronger mirror metaphor coincides with Leibniz’s increasing use of the term ‘monad’ to describe the foundational substances of the Leibnizian universe. As primitive forces, monads are inherently active beings and Leibniz modifies his mirror metaphor to accommodate this. Souls or monads are *living* mirrors. Each simple substance is “a perpetual, living mirror of the universe”,<sup>15</sup> each one “endowed with internal action”.<sup>16</sup>

As *living* mirrors, monads differ from ordinary mirrors in significant ways. Monads are naturally indestructible unities, lacking component parts into which they could be broken.<sup>17</sup> Self-contained, non-interacting and independent, with their own internal life forces, they bring forth the images contained in their own essences. Not depending upon any other mirrors, their perceptions arise spontaneously and would still occur even if no other mirror existed. “[E]ach substance is like a world apart, independent of all other things”.<sup>18</sup> Even their reflections of themselves are entirely internal affairs, something ordinary mirrors can have only with the assistance of other mirrors. However, more significant are the respects in which living mirrors agree with their ordinary lifeless mirror counterparts. We turn now to consider some of those shared features, beginning with the spatio-temporal characters of their representations of the world.<sup>19</sup>

---

<sup>10</sup> Leibniz to Sophie, 4 November 1696; GP VII, 542/ LTS 151-152.

<sup>11</sup> Leibniz to Sophie, 6 February 1706; GP VII, 567/ LTS 347. See also *Monadology* §63; GP VI, 618.

<sup>12</sup> To Des Billettes, 4/14 December 1696; GP VII, 452/ L 473.

<sup>13</sup> For instance, *Monadology* §63; GP VI, 618.

<sup>14</sup> *Principles of Nature and Grace* §14; GP VI, 604/ AG 211. See also *Monadology* §83; GP VI, 621.

<sup>15</sup> *Monadology* §56; GP VI, 616/ AG 220. See also, for instance, Leibniz’s unpublished remarks on the extract from the Bayle’s *Critical Dictionary*, article Rorarius, comment L; GP IV, 532 and Leibniz’s Fifth Letter to Clarke; GP VII 411.

<sup>16</sup> *Principles of Nature and Grace* §3; GP VI, 599/ AG 207.

<sup>17</sup> *Monadology* §77; GP VI, 620. See also, Leibniz to Sophie, 6 February 1706; GP VII, 567.

<sup>18</sup> *Discourse on Metaphysics* §14; A VI, 4B 1550/ AG 47. See also *New System of the Nature of Substances and their Communication*; GP IV, 484.

<sup>19</sup> Living mirror monads – and ordinary mirrors too – contain infinity. I do not enter here into the complexities of mirrors’ infinite natures, but the infinity of the living mirror is addressed in Ohad Nachtomy: *Living Mirrors: Infinity, Unity, and Life in Leibniz’s Philosophy*, forthcoming, ch. 7.

### 3. Space and Time

Italian Renaissance masters, such as Filippo Brunelleschi and Paolo Uccello, perfected the art of perspective by making lines in the two-dimensional painting draw the viewer's eye towards one or more infinitesimal vanishing points, thereby creating the illusion of a three-dimensional spatial image on a two-dimensional canvas. Mirrors played no small part in the development of the technique. When one looks in a mirror, one sees not a flat two-dimensional image, but an image with spatial depth that seems to exist in the space behind the mirror. Looking at the mirror, one may feel, like Lewis Carroll's Alice,<sup>20</sup> as though if one could only walk into the mirror, one would enter a world whose contents and spatial dimensions, although reversed, are the same as those in the real world that the mirror reflects. Such imaginary outings must remain, however, in the realm of fiction. In the actual world, one cannot walk into the mirror: beyond its glass remains a closed space, enclosed within the mirror itself, a *private* image of a *public* world.

In this regard, Leibniz's mirror-metaphor is strikingly apt. Monads' perceptual representations of the world – their mirror images – also represent the external world as a world of bodies with length, breadth and depth situated in a three-dimensional space, a world that appears as one into which an external being could enter, but from which it is forever barred. The three-dimensional space of the mirror monad is private to that monad alone, internal to the monad that has no windows through which anything can enter or depart and whose representations of the external world cannot be transgressed by anything from outside. We can no more walk into the three-dimensional world of another monad than we can walk into the three-dimensional world of the glass mirror.

Both the artist's perspectival paintings and the glass-worker's mirrors produce representations of three-dimensional space. However, there is one crucial difference between the artist's reproduction of a three-dimensional space and the image in the mirror. On completion, the scenes represented in the painting remain static. Barring any later modifications, portraits, still-life studies, and landscape paintings do not change: they simply capture in perpetuity a moment in time now past. As a consequence of the passage of time in which the light passes from the external object to the mirror itself, the images in the mirror similarly capture moments in time now past. However, unlike the unchanging images in a finished painting, the images in the mirror are in constant flux, keeping pace with the changing nature of the things outside that they reflect.

In this regard too, the appropriateness of Leibniz's mirror-m Monad is evident. The monad's images also change as the world it represents changes, never the same from one moment to the next. Monads' perceptions or representations keep track with the world outside. Moreover, as in ordinary mirrors and paintings alike, there is a lapse of time between the event happening in the world and its

---

<sup>20</sup> Lewis Carroll: *Through the Looking-Glass, and What Alice Found There*, London 1871.

representation in the living monad. Monads represent the world through the medium of their own bodies, each one perceiving the changes external bodies have made on its organic body.<sup>21</sup> Just as it takes time for the light from an object to travel to the mirror, so too it takes time, however short, for the light to travel to the perceiver's eye. In his *New Essays on Human Understanding*, Leibniz makes the point that our present perceptions of paintings are always perceptions of the painting, not as it exists now, but as it existed a moment before. Although we might believe that "we immediately see the thing that causes the image", in fact:

"we see only the image, and are affected only by rays of light. Since rays of light need time – however little – to reach us, it is possible that the object should be destroyed during the interval and no longer exist when the light reaches the eye; and something which no longer exists cannot be the present object of our sight".<sup>22</sup>

It is not only in the viewing of paintings that time-lapses intervene. Inanimate objects and living bodies alike, perceived through any organ of sense, might no longer exist by the time their presence has been registered in a perception in the soul. Nor are images in ordinary mirrors or sensory images in living mirrors excepted: they too register *not* the present state of the world, but rather its immediately preceding state.

A monad's present images represent the immediately preceding past, but of course, as we know, Leibniz holds that the whole of the past and the whole of the future are also represented in each present image, although always less distinctly than its present perception of the immediate past. Each passing present reflection is an effect of all the prior causes that have led up to the events now reflected in the monad-mirror. In this sense, the monad-mirror's images stretch backwards in time, even into deep geological time. As Leibniz tells Arnauld, "the indications [*les traces*] of the past are preserved for ever in each thing".<sup>23</sup> So too, pointing forwards, one perception paves the way for the next, and for the one after that, and for the one after that, and so forth. Hence, the present image not only retains "the indications of the past" but also already contains the "lineaments [*les traits*] of the future".<sup>24</sup>

Leibniz's causal explanation of the monad's mirroring of the past and the future would seem to apply equally to ordinary mirrors. Their present images too reflect objects with causal histories and future consequences and these past causes and future effects might be regarded as in some way also contained in mirrors' images. All mirrors, living and nonliving, can be said to embrace the past, the present and the future in each of their fleeting images or perceptions.

---

<sup>21</sup> As Leibniz explains in a letter to Arnauld, 9 October 1687; A II, 2, 242/LA 145: "since we perceive other bodies only through their relationship to ours, I was right to say that the soul expresses better what pertains to our body; therefore, the satellites of Saturn or Jupiter are known only in consequence of a movement which occurs in our eyes".

<sup>22</sup> A VI, 6, 135/ RB 135.

<sup>23</sup> Leibniz to Arnauld, 30 April 1687; A II, 2, 188/ LA 123.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*

As the following discussion will highlight, however, they do so with varying degrees of clarity or distinctness.

#### *4. Degrees of representation*

Each monad is a living mirror of the whole universe, reflecting each and every one of the infinitely many, mutually reflecting, living monad-mirrors that comprise Leibniz's universe. Insofar as they all represent the same universe, the representational content of each of their perceptions is the same. This means that it is not possible to differentiate one monad from another by reference only to the content of their perceptions. However, they can be differentiated by the differing ways in which that content is exhibited. Leibniz addressed the issue in a draft letter to Nicolas Remond:

“each simple substance is a mirror of the same universe, as lasting and as ample as it, although these perceptions of created beings can only be distinct with respect to a few things at once and they are differentiated by the relations or, so to speak, by the points of view of the mirrors, which make it that the same universe is multiplied in an infinity of ways by as many living mirrors, each representing it in its own way”.<sup>25</sup>

Each perception “can only be distinct with respect to a few things at once”. Among the “few things” that each monad perceives relatively more distinctly is its own organic body. We've already had reason to note how although the soul perceives everything in the universe, it does so from the perspectival view afforded by its perceptions of its own body. The soul perceives external bodies only through their relationship to its own. What Leibniz infers from this is that, although it mirrors the whole universe, each soul perceives most distinctly what is closest to it, namely, the organic body to which it is attached and within this organic body, those parts that are in more immediate contact with the external bodies are perceived most distinctly of all. Hence, the nerves are:

“more sensitive parts for us than others, and it is perhaps only through them that we apperceive others, which apparently occurs because the movements of the nerves or of the liquids belonging to them imitate impressions better and confuse them less”.<sup>26</sup>

Ordinary mirrors too represent their surroundings with different degrees of clarity and distinctness. Some have surfaces that are blurred or damaged and can represent things only confusedly; others have surfaces that are cleaner and brighter and their images are correspondingly sharper and more distinct. Equally, just as living monads mirror the universe through the prism of their own immediately present and more distinctly perceived bodies, nonliving

---

<sup>25</sup> Leibniz to Remond, July 1714; GP III, 623 / D. Rutherford, <http://philosophyfaculty.ucsd.edu/faculty/rutherford/Leibniz/translations/RemondVII1714.pdf>

<sup>26</sup> Leibniz to Arnauld, 30 April 1687; A II, 2, 175-176/ LA 113-114. See also, Leibniz to Arnauld, 9 October 1687; A II, 2, 241-242.

mirrors too represent most distinctly the things in their immediate environs. Similarly capable of distinctly representing only “a few things at once”, they reflect most distinctly what is closest to them, less distinctly whatever is further away in space and in time.<sup>27</sup>

Although all monads perceive their own bodies more distinctly than they perceive the rest of the world, rational monads can also distinctly perceive their own perceiving selves. In the following section, we consider how self-reflections arise in monad-mirrors and contrast this with the conditions that allow ordinary mirrors to contain reflections of themselves.

### 5. Self-reflecting mirrors

At *Monadology* §30, Leibniz states that it is:

“through the knowledge of necessary truths and through their abstractions that we rise to *reflective acts*, which enable us to think of that which is called ‘I’ and enable us to consider that this or that is in us”.<sup>28</sup>

Being able to think in abstract terms, the self-conscious rational being is able to conceive distinctly the ‘I’ (a thing that, as we shall see, by its very nature thinks about many things) and to distinguish this perceiving ‘I’ from the things in the world at large that it perceives. This means that self-conscious minds or rational souls “have incomparably greater perfection than the forms thrust into matter”.<sup>29</sup> Nevertheless, although the (substantial) forms “thrust into matter” do not consciously know themselves as perceivers, it is conceivable that they, albeit obscurely, perceive their own perceptions. While in Paris, Leibniz had written a short piece known as *On Reminiscence and on the Mind’s Self-reflection*. The piece is an account of Leibniz’s own forays into the spiral of thoughts generated by his thinking of his thinking, then thinking of his thinking of his thinking, and so on. Being aware of the recursive nature of the procedure and of the temporal interval between each reflection upon a past reflection – an awareness of the “intervals of these beats” – allows Leibniz to conclude that each:

“reflection of a reflection – in the mind a little before ... already existed before, and so the perception of a perception to infinity is perpetually in the mind”.<sup>30</sup>

In *On Reminiscence and on the Mind’s Self-reflection*, Leibniz is concerned only with those reflections of reflections of which he is consciously aware. However, if the reflections of reflections are already in the mind, then prior to their being consciously perceived, they must be in the mind as obscure rather than distinct perceptions of perceptions. Indeed, we may presume that there is an infinity of obscurely perceived perceptions of perceptions in the mind. And this in turn

---

<sup>27</sup> Neither the finite monad mirror nor the ordinary physical mirror, we may add, reflects its surroundings with absolute clarity and distinctness.

<sup>28</sup> GP VI, 612/ AG 217. Cp. *Discourse on Metaphysics* §34; A VI, 4B, 1583.

<sup>29</sup> *New System*; GP IV, 478/ AG 140.

<sup>30</sup> DSR 74-75.

opens up the possibility that even though the lowest, most obscurely perceiving monads have no distinct awareness of themselves as perceiving beings, perceptions of perceptions might nevertheless occur *ad infinitum* in them too.

Whether perception of their perceptions to infinity occurs in all monads will not be further investigated here. It is sufficient for our purposes to note that bare monads' perceptions of their perceptions, if such they have, and minds' reflections of themselves arise entirely from within the monads themselves. None has any windows through which anything can enter or depart.<sup>31</sup> All of a monad's perceptions, including any self-perceptions, arise, not through the action of anything external, but solely through the activity of the monad's own internal force.

As concentrated worlds,<sup>32</sup> complete in themselves, living mirrors reflections of themselves or their perceptions of their perceptions occur independently of, and irrespective of, the existence or non-existence of other living mirrors. Ordinary, nonliving mirrors, on the other hand, contain reflections of themselves and reflections of their own images only in the presence of other existing mirrors. Only when nonliving mirrors are placed directly in front of each other does the image of the one reflected in the other find its way back to the first as a reflection of the reflected image. Admittedly, when nonliving mirrors reflect each other in this way, the reflections in each facing mirror multiply *ad infinitum*. Like the mind's "perception of a perception to infinity" described by Leibniz in his Paris Notes, each mirror's image of itself is reproduced endlessly over and over again. Still, it remains the case that an ordinary lifeless mirror can only 'see' itself, as it were, by reflecting the image of itself as it appears in the other. Whether mirrors' self-reflections do or do not depend upon the existence of other mirrors would therefore appear to mark a fundamental point of difference between living and nonliving mirrors: ordinary mirrors' self-reflections occur only if other mirrors exist, but monads' self-reflections occur regardless of whether any other monad-mirrors exist.

All metaphors eventually reach a point of collapse and we might consider this to be that point. However, although undoubtedly the issues exposes tension in the metaphor, I do not believe we have yet reached the metaphor's final breaking point. The metaphor has yet more to reveal, for although it is the true that the indivisible unity and independence of the monad means that the actual existence of other mirrors is not essential to the monad's ability to reflect upon itself, the monad's self-reflection, like self-reflection in nonliving mirrors, is dependent upon the mirror's ability to contain in itself images of external things.

We began this section with a quotation from the *Monadology* in which Leibniz describes the mind's "*reflective acts*" as acts that "enable us to think of that which is called 'I' and enable us to consider that this or that is in us" and in which he claims that these acts of self-reflection are made possible "through our

---

<sup>31</sup> *Monadology* §7; GP VI, 607.

<sup>32</sup> Leibniz to De Volder, 20 June 1703; LV 262-263.

knowledge of necessary truths and through their abstractions".<sup>33</sup> The omission of any reference to the soul's sensory perceptions of others encourages the view that Leibniz regarded sense perceptions of external things as irrelevant to the mind's ability to reflect upon itself. His highlighting of knowledge of necessary truths and abstractions gives the impression that he believes that the only things that the self-reflecting mind needs to consider as being in it are its abstract and necessary innate ideas. This impression is reinforced by some remarks of Leibniz in the Preface to the *New Essays*:

"reflection is nothing but attention to what is within us, and the senses do not give us what we carry with us already. In view of this, can it be denied that there is a great deal that is innate in our minds, since we are innate to ourselves, so to speak, and since we include Being, Unity, Substance, Duration, Change, Action, Perception, Pleasure, and hosts of other objects of our intellectual ideas?"<sup>34</sup>

However, as Leibniz had already observed in the *Discourse on Metaphysics*, the distinction between ideas that are innate and ideas that are derived from the senses, although useful, is not in metaphysical strictness, defensible.<sup>35</sup> Everything that is 'in us' is innate. Technically, the senses do not give us anything at all. The point is made even in the opening chapter of the *New Essays*, where Leibniz confesses his belief that "all the thoughts and actions of our soul come from its own depths and could not be given to it by the senses".<sup>36</sup> Leibniz reiterates the point a few years later in a letter to Coste:

"I have also shown that when we take things in a certain metaphysical sense, we are always in a state of perfect spontaneity, and that what we attribute to the impressions of external things arises only from confused perceptions in us corresponding to them".<sup>37</sup>

There are 'in us' not only those ideas we call 'innate', but also numerous confused perceptions and even "at every moment there is an infinity of perceptions unaccompanied by awareness or reflection".<sup>38</sup> When, therefore, the mind reflects upon itself and considers "this or that" to be in it, should not the "this or that" include at least the mind's sensory perceptions as well as its more abstract thoughts? After all, "this nature that pertains to the soul is representative of the universe in a very exact manner (though more or less distinctly)".<sup>39</sup> When self-consciously reflecting upon its own representative nature as a mirror of a universe populated by an infinity of other mirrors, should not the mind take into account not only its general abstract idea of itself as a perceiving substance, but also its particular perceptions of these other mirrors, as seen from its own unique perspective?

---

<sup>33</sup> *Monadology* §30; GP VI, 612/ AG 217.

<sup>34</sup> A VI, 6, 51/ RB 51. See also, *Discourse on Metaphysics* §27; A VI, 4B, 1571-1572 and Letter to Queen Sophie Charlotte of Prussia, *On What is Independent of Sense and Matter*; GP VI, 501-502.

<sup>35</sup> *Discourse on Metaphysics* §27; A VI, 4B, 1571-1572.

<sup>36</sup> A VI, 6, 74/ RB 74.

<sup>37</sup> Leibniz to Coste, 19 December 1707; GP III, 403/ AG 195.

<sup>38</sup> *New Essays* Preface; A VI, 6, 53/RB 53.

<sup>39</sup> *New System*; GP IV, 485/ AG 144.

If so, the self-reflections of rational living mirrors are not so far removed from the self-reflections ordinary nonliving mirrors as first it seemed. The nonliving mirror can only contain images of itself by reflecting the image of itself that is contained in another. Effectively, it needs to have an image of the other mirror if it is to reflect itself. Of course, the windowless living mirror self-reflects by turning inwards to perceive its own substantial self and its perceptions, but its own nature dictates that within itself are contained perceptions or images of mirrors outside of itself. Effectively, it too needs to have images of other mirrors if it is to self-consciously reflect on its reflections. It would appear, then, that for both the living and the nonliving mirror, self-reflection involves the having of images of mirrors other than itself.

In the next and final section, our discussion turns to morals. Throughout history, ordinary mirrors have been regarded as having instrumental value and significance for the moral improvement of human beings.<sup>40</sup> However, they are obviously not themselves moral agents. I will therefore put aside discussion of the ordinary mirror in order to explore, albeit with a broad brush, the moral nature of rational self-reflecting minds and why it is important ethically that the mind's images of other mirrors are as distinct or perfect as it is possible for them to be.

### 6. Moral mirrors

On account of their rationality and knowledge of the eternal truths – the facilitating grounds of their self-reflective acts – minds are able not only to consciously appreciate the perfection of God's works, but also to self-consciously imitate God's works in their own productions and activities, basing their choices and deliberations on considerations of what is good and what is for the best for themselves and for others. For these reasons, each mind is said to be “an image of the divinity”<sup>41</sup> and is a member of the moral City of God where God, ruling as both monarch<sup>42</sup> and legislator,<sup>43</sup> ensures that “there will be no good action that is unrewarded, no bad action that goes unpunished”.<sup>44</sup>

As rational images of the divine, it is incumbent upon us to perfect our own natures so that we may reflect the glory of God to the very best of our abilities. The perfecting of our own natures consists in making our perceptions as distinct as we can: “the soul itself knows the things it perceives only so far as it has distinct and heightened [*revelées*] perceptions; and it has perfection to the extent that it has distinct perceptions”.<sup>45</sup> To perfect our souls is to polish our mirror, so that it reflects the universe without blemish or contortion. Mirroring the best

---

<sup>40</sup> See, for instance, Melchior Bonnet: *The Mirror*, pp. 105-115.

<sup>41</sup> *Principles of Nature and Grace* §14; GP VI, 604/ AG 211. See also *Monadology* §83; GP VI, 621.

<sup>42</sup> *Monadology* §87; GP VI, 622.

<sup>43</sup> *Monadology* §89; GP VI, 622.

<sup>44</sup> *Monadology* §90; GP VI, 622/ AG 224.

<sup>45</sup> *Principles of Nature and Grace*, §13; GP VI, 604/ AG 211.

possible world distinctly exposes its perfection: its harmony, beauty, and goodness. Leibniz defines beauty in terms of the pleasurable feelings we derive from contemplating beautiful things<sup>46</sup> and he conceives benevolent love in terms of the disposition to derive pleasure from “the perfection, well-being or happiness” of those beings who are themselves capable of pleasure or happiness.<sup>47</sup> We wish well those whom we love, assist them in their endeavours, and, when they flourish, we are pleased for their sakes, not for our own.

Mirrors, as we found earlier, reflect the past, present and future of the universe. This prompts the question whether the love we feel towards beings capable of happiness is possible only in relation to those who are present to us today or can (and perhaps should) it be extended to those in the past and in the future? How could this be so, one might ask? Surely those who existed in the past cannot be objects of love for they no longer exist and are no longer capable of happiness. Equally, those who might exist in the future cannot be the objects of our love for they do not yet exist and indeed they might never come into existence. Currently, they are only vague possibilities and possibilities are not capable of pleasure and happiness. But no such response is available to Leibniz. The indestructibility of the monads entails that everything created in the first moment of time still exists in some form now and will continue to exist in some form in the future, while pre-established harmony ensures that the futures of all living things are not mere possibilities, but are already mapped out with certainty.

“[D]eath”, considers Leibniz, “is nothing but the contraction of an animal, just as generation is nothing but its unfolding”.<sup>48</sup> Death is neither the end of existence nor the end of perception, but merely the falling into unconsciousness, as if into a deep sleep, where all perceptions are insensible and indistinct.<sup>49</sup> For nonhuman animals, Leibniz theorizes, death consists in a diminution of their being that causes them to “reenter the recesses of a world of minute creatures”, from which they may at some point in the future emerge.<sup>50</sup> Rational minds, however, enjoy a different fate. They do not find themselves exiled to the depths of the material world.<sup>51</sup> Nor is their citizenship of the City of God revoked: the “republic can never lose any of its members”<sup>52</sup> and it is because of this, that minds “must always keep their moral qualities and their memory”.<sup>53</sup> Whether Leibniz considered minds might self-consciously retain their memories in death is not clear. When, for instance, in the preface to the *New Essays*, he writes that “death can only be a sleep, and not a lasting one at that”, he confines his remark to the

---

<sup>46</sup> *Elements of Natural Law*; A VI, 1, 464/ L 137: “We seek beautiful things because they are pleasant, for I define beauty as that, the contemplation of which is pleasant”.

<sup>47</sup> *New Essays*; A VI, 6, 163/ RB 163.

<sup>48</sup> To Johann Bernoulli, 18 November 1698; GM III, 553/ AG 169. See also *Principles of Nature and Grace* §6; GP VI, 601-602.

<sup>49</sup> *New Essays* Preface; A VI, 6, 55/ RB 55.

<sup>50</sup> Leibniz to Arnauld, 30 April 1687; A II, 2, 189/ AG 88.

<sup>51</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>52</sup> *Ibid.*; A II, 2, 189-190.

<sup>53</sup> *Ibid.*; A II 2 189.

animals, declining to “discuss the case of man, who must in this regard have special prerogatives for safeguarding his personhood”.<sup>54</sup>

Whatever the precise nature of their post-death states, it is clearly Leibniz’s view that rational souls – and indeed all souls – continue to exist as substances after death and that each continues to mirror, however obscurely, the universe from its own point of view. If rational beings retain their personalities and their memories even after death, then either they remain self-conscious in their death states or they will one day awaken from their deep slumbers. In either case, might we not assume that they are still capable of happiness and perfection, and therefore still possible objects of love – love, as we recall, being the disposition to be pleased by the other’s “perfection, well-being or happiness”?<sup>55</sup>

Our own perfectibility, as we have seen, lies in the making more distinct our perceptions of the world, so that we may more distinctly perceive the perfection, beauty and goodness of the world and each of its constituents, and through this come to love not only God, the most perfect being, but also all rational beings capable of happiness that God has created. And insofar as we are rational living mirrors of the universe whose perceptions extend backwards into the past and forwards into the future, do we not have a moral responsibility to seek the good throughout the whole, not just in that little part of the mirror that represents the present (or more precisely the near past), and to love to the best of our abilities *all* the rational beings we find there?

Leibniz is one such rational being. In this tercentenary year of his death, we commemorate his mirrored perspective on the world. And when we reflect on the perceptions that are in each of us, let us find among them reflections of Leibniz that distinctly highlight the beauty and perfection of his mirror of the best possible world, reflections that dispose us to love Leibniz and to derive pleasure from the thought of his present or future happiness and well-being.

---

<sup>54</sup> A VI, 6, 55/ RB 55.

<sup>55</sup> *New Essays*; A VI,6, 163/ RB 163.