

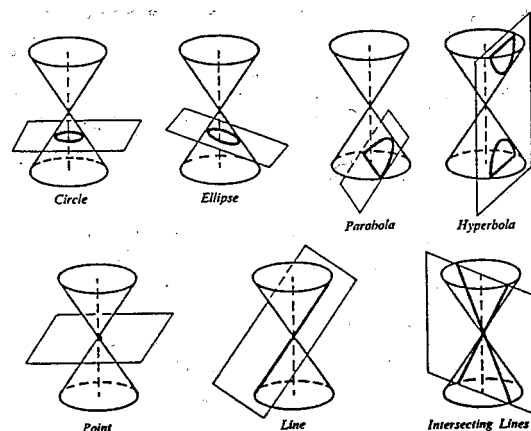
Theory of Perception in Leibniz

1. Leibniz's phenomenalism (or immaterialist metaphysics) connects theory of substance, theory of perception and dynamics under a general theory of monads. Thus, for Leibniz, substance and its states, as well as bodies and their forces, are to be understood in terms of the mind and its perceptions. Accordingly, it is crucial to sort out the lineaments of the theory of perception through which Leibniz provides the unification of his metaphysics.

2. Two preliminaries: (a) not all substances are minds, nor are they all aware of their surroundings (the theory of substance would remain intact even if no human knowers existed); and (b) the theory of perception is a *metaphysical* but not an *epistemological* theory ("perception" does not account, as in the empiricists, for how we come to know the world--it accounts for what the world is).

3. Leibniz worked out the central features of his theory of perception at least as early as 1687; he writes to Arnauld: "A perception is the expression or representation of the many in the one or the composite in the simple." Arnauld replied: "You say our soul expresses even the whole universe. . . but if you mean some thought or item of knowledge, I cannot agree. . . but if not, I do not know what it [a perception] is" (28 August 1687). Leibniz replies: "One thing *expresses* another when there exists a constant, fixed relationship between what can be said of one and of the other. This is the way that a perspectival projection expresses its ground plan" (9 October 1687). But the core idea--perspectival projection--was already developed some nine years earlier (in the fragment, *What is an Idea?*). Here Leibniz provides a list of examples: a model expresses a machine, a map expresses a geographical area, a projective drawing in a plane expresses a solid, a whole effect expresses a whole cause, an algebraic equation expresses a geometrical figure, characters express numbers, and the world, expresses God. What impressed Leibniz about all these examples was that we can pass from a consideration of the relations in the expression to a knowledge of the relations in thing expressed. His favorite example, however, was perspectival projection: he used it, for example, against Locke's differentiation of qualities into primary and secondary and as an articulation of the Principle of Harmony.

4. Locke had supposed that while our ideas of the primary qualities resemble real qualities of objects, our ideas of the secondary qualities do not. Leibniz argues against this view that the secondary qualities exhibit an incomplete but *expressive* resemblance. In the *Theodicy*, for instance, he writes: "It is true that the same thing may be represented in different ways: the projections in perspective of the conic sections of the circle show that one and the same circle may be represented by an ellipse, parabola, hyperbola, another circle, straight line, even a point. Nothing appears so different nor so dissimilar as these figures; and yet there is an exact relation between each point and every other point. Thus one must allow that each soul represents the universe to itself according to its point of view, and through a relation which is peculiar to it; but a perfect harmony always subsists therein" (*Theodicy*, §357). Thus:



5. Expression, then, is the genus of which perception, animal sensation, and intellectual knowledge are species.

6. Consequently, for Leibniz, a soul expresses the particular states of its own body, but through its body it expresses the states of the rest of the universe, no part of which can fail to have some effect on it through the propagation to infinity of motion in a mechanically operating universe. He writes to Sophia: "The universe being in a way fluid, all of one piece, and like a limitless ocean, all motions are conserved and propagated to infinity. . . this communication of motion means that each thing acts on and is affected by every other thing" (to Electress Sophia, 9 February 1706).

7. In order to hold this theory over against Arnauld's worries (Arnauld does not find in his own mind anything even remotely like an awareness of the whole universe), Leibniz invents a distinction between conscious and unconscious perception. He does this by differentiating *distinct* and *confused* perceptions in such a manner so as to allow one and the same perception to be both distinct *and* confused. A perception is distinct in terms of its *external* relations to other perceptions from which it is distinguished, while a perception will be confused in terms of the infinitude of *petite perceptions* of which it is composed. Leibniz has two favorite examples: (a) the roar of the surf is *distinct* from, say, the roar of a lion, but the roar of the surf is a *confused* aggregate of all the waves we must be perceiving below the threshold of apperception (conscious awareness); and (b) the color green is *distinct* from, say, the color purple, but the color green is a *confused* aggregate of perceptions of the colors blue and yellow, neither of which we apperceive when examining green objects.