And just as the same town, when looked at from different sides, appears quite different and is, as it were, multiplied in perspective, so it also happens that because of the infinite number of simple substances, it is as if there were as many different universes, which are however but different perspectives on a single universe.

The quotation at the head of this chapter serves Leibniz as a metaphor for the innumerable possible perspectives on the universe which are all true, though each yields necessarily only a partial vision. It reflects his belief in our human capacity to achieve the truth on God’s creation, and moreover that we have a privileged perspective on account of being endowed with the same faculty of rationality of which God himself is the supreme instance.

Philosophy is the endeavour to read the fingerprint of the creator on his works. For Leibniz this entails an acknowledgement that they are on exhibit for us to admire – that the creator has provided a window for us to experience the world in its multifaceted abundance and discern cognitively its rational structure, even though its causal system extends into an infinitude of dimensions.

This has far-reaching implications for the study of his philosophy. There are two strains in his thinking, the realistic and the ideal; but to the philosopher of harmony these are aspects of one unbreakable reality. The division brings in its train a recognition that the world of phenomena is immensely rich in variety, but finite; it lies therefore within the competence of natural philosophy to unravel and explicate it. Meanwhile the underlying causal structure is simple but infinite; and it is the office of metaphysics to guide us into the heart of these connections, without fostering the illusion that we can ever attain a complete view.

But if the cosmos is one, then a philosophy purporting to embrace it must be. Leibniz was fond of stressing the systematicity of his thought, yet over time it shows a natural impulse towards prolixity and of resistance to pruning it of dying strands and purely decorative foliation. This poses significant problems of interpretation. Part of every scholarly effort is to make the congeries we call his ‘works’ look like a system.

It is a probative exercise, with temptation lurking at every corner to shift the pieces into a kaleidoscope of post-Leibnizian manufacture. What militates against it is the divorce of science from philosophy in the mid-18th century, which would have seemed folly to Leibniz. Open any page of his writings to see physics happily consorting with metaphysics – it is the pattern of his thinking. He made his mark in public with a paper for the Royal Society (A New Physical Hypothesis, 1671) and ended his career in controversy with Newton (1716). In between, the Summa rerum contains papers on mind, matter, motion and minima; the New System is accompanied by his Specimen Dynamicum; and the Monadology was written side by side with the Foundations of Mathematics. Metaphysics, mathematics and natural philosophy together are the warp and

1 Monadology, §57.
2 Disc. Met. §14: “For God, as it were, turns on all sides and in all ways the general system of phenomena which he finds it good to produce in order to manifest his glory.”
weft of their texture. The cost of breaking this pattern is prohibitive; and it is primarily as a result of downgrading his ‘worldly thinking’ that Leibniz’s philosophy has come in some expositions to resemble an introvert’s mummery rather than the confident, sun-lit rationalism which the pages of history portray.³

Our effort in this study is to leave intact what was one to the philosopher. Its subdivisions reflect the orientation we have sought to establish. Thus Part I comprises an elaboration of the double-aspect theory, Part II a refinement of the doctrine of force into an ontology of agency, and Part III the metaphysics of the continuum. What we hope to achieve is a cohesive portrayal of Leibniz’s ontology. That it projects, like every true philosophy, a deep relevance into our own preoccupations in science and metaphysics, may be noted in passing.

Our motto we take from Leibniz himself:

The genus world is one of a kind, which means no existents except bodies are given, and we sense them as souls or soul-like and not as bodies if they are not a certain distance from us. For if they were not given, one could not say if they exist now or not, which is contrary to first principles.⁴

There is no indication that Leibniz ever deviated from the idea encapsulated in these words, but it took him many years of thought and debate to draw all its implications into the light.

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³ Since a preponderance of scholarly opinion relies on the Monadology as Leibniz’s final word, this downgrading beckons a ‘no external world’ factor onto the stage where monads, bottled up in their hermetic selves, perceive phenomena that are less bene fundata than the shadows in Plato’s cave. Our central concern must be that such an emphasis discards Leibniz’s explicit worldly orientation and leads to a disharmonious and ultimately incoherent philosophy of denial.