Introduction

Leibniz – realist, idealist or phenomenalist?

The main issue to be articulated in this thesis is the proposition that Leibniz’s mature philosophy is best, or preferably, presented as a double-aspect ontology. In its most evident meaning this implies that natural philosophy and metaphysics deal each with the same world, but gaze at it from different perspectives and therefore study aspects of its objects, events and features in a way which may then be taken as an account of two witnesses to the same story. This in itself is a somewhat unusual procedure, to be justified in due course. It implies, however, a new angle on the ‘isms’ named in the title line. Also, it involves clarification of the issue of its applicability to Leibniz’s philosophy as a whole and how one might in such a context account for the fluctuations of standpoint discernible in the writings of his younger years as well as his increasing idealistic tendencies in the last decade of his life. In anticipation of such worries, it is best to state forthwith that the thesis is indeed centred on the period which may serve as the high watermark of his philosophical career – roughly the two decades before the turn to a new century. However, this does not exclude acknowledgement of some measure of overflow after its end as well as observing the enormous intellectual tensions welling up in the writings of his Paris years preparatory to this period of rich confidence and ample achievement.

This concentration brings in its train an emphasis on a sustained engagement with – or perhaps better phrased: a powerful urge towards – realism. It is only to be expected that in its concrescence it will be criss-crossed by phenomenalism and idealism; and indeed close attention to such highly potent tensions furnished the initial impulse for thinking of Leibniz’s philosophy as a double-aspect theory. A remark offered to Rémond in his last years (when indeed he is supposed to have turned fully towards idealism) lends support, moreover, to the viewpoint here espoused that he never actually abandoned the platform of realism gained from these efforts.¹

Two difficulties surface at this point. The first is concerned with the meaning we should associate with the terms realism, idealism and phenomenalism. The second is the question of whether they are necessarily antagonistic to each other or compatible – in other words, whether a philosopher may be ‘allowed’ to hold an ex aequo commitment to realism and idealism.

In dealing with this issue, however, difficulties with terminology obtrude. It cannot be assumed that philosophy is equipped with a standard of nomenclatures agreed upon by all parties; and in many instances part of the interpretive problem is the precise notion of any of these ‘isms’ held by either the philosopher or the scholar. With realism, for example, there is a generous clutch of alternatives to choose from; and merely to mention it, no-one speaking of realism today would dream of agreeing to medieval-scholastic doctrine (i.e. conceptual realism), which may be said to have been definitely defeated by nominalism. Yet even today the roster is cluttered with variants denominated respectively as epistemological, modal, moral, ontological, semantic,

¹ “You are right in judging that [my Dynamica] is to a great extent the foundation of my system; for it is there that we learn the difference between truths whose necessity is brute and geometrical, and truths which have their source in fitness and final causes.” Rémond, G III 645.
legal, political and literary realism. It seems appropriate therefore to state explicitly what the realism espoused in this thesis amounts to – whose default nomenclature would be ontological realism:

*A theory which affirms the existence of objects and events, and their properties and relations, in the universe which obtain irrespective of our beliefs about them and independently of our ability to discern them.*

Two important implications are that some existents are unknown to us (which may be discoverable) and that some known to exist may resist being known to us as what they are.

Now this seems at once to occupy the opposite pole to the brand of idealism whose denomination for our purpose would be framed in the words:

*A theory which asserts that the world is comprehended wholly in the form of mental representations.*

If taken in this form, idealism is indubitably compatible with Leibniz; and indeed we shall have occasion in this thesis to take particular note of various itineraries in his thinking where this compatibility is ‘smeared over’. But here again we have to beware of a distinction which centres on the crucial issue of whether the idealist is prepared to allow the existence of an external world or not. This is by no means obvious and cannot be taken for granted.

For idealism embraces at least two positions, one of which happens to figure in the philosophy most often associated and compared with that of Leibniz, namely Spinozism. This type of idealism does not concede an external world, but comprises a rigorous pantheism. Although the specifications of the monad offered by Leibniz seem to exhibit a cognate proclivity towards panpsychism, their development proceeds in a different direction by conceding a world of independent causality. This, as we shall see, is one of his central categories. But understood in this way, the idealism is modified to promote an understanding more closely aligned to our intuitive understanding of the world. Namely, that it is no diminution of idealism to refer the origin of mental representations to this independent causality.

To put this into a nutshell, we are speaking here of the difference between understanding a sensation of pain as ‘all in the mind’ and meaning by this either with or without a mind-independent occasion bringing it on. One way or another the pain is ‘in’ the mind, but the question of its origin cannot remain unstated. The intuitive position would be that it is ‘delivered’ to, and thus apperceived, by the mind. Alternatively some fact of the world, e.g. a cup, may be perceived as one thing, but this oneness is imposed by the mind on a plurality of things which it chooses to see as one. Leibniz’s idealisms conforms substantially to this point of view.

This is what ‘modified’ idealism denotes; from which it will be seen at once that such a philosophy opens two windows on causality and operates as a double-aspect ontology. The implication and indeed crucial point pursued throughout this study is that Leibniz is on the qui vive for exceptions to both the realist and idealist interpretation of the world and altogether willing to allow each its due as the occasion demands. He blends, so to speak, his realism and idealism in different proportions to suit his purposes. In this pliancy his writings show up favourably vis-à-vis the sometimes ex-

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2 E.g. in his phenomenotaxis, where five of his seven categories are ‘idealistic’ and two ‘purely realist’. Cf. Part I, Sect. 5.
aggerated dogmatism of his commentators in favour of one to the exclusion of the other.3

One further consideration enters the picture here. This brand of idealism must perforce include a concession to objects existing in a form which is not comprehensible to us. Now this seems immediately to be refuted by the specification that *all monads mirror the whole world*, though confusedly – with all the implications we must associate with that claim. But when we inspect this dictum closely we shall find that it refers to the principle of harmony and sufficient reason. It does not constitute an exclusionary insistence on deriving existence from the mental life of the subject.4 Moreover, the imputed contradiction arises from an undue focus on the single monad. We shall have opportunity early in our presentation of the double-aspect theory to make the point that ‘the monad’ is the specification of a possible existent; but not a specification of its existence. Actuality for monads rests on their ‘collectivisation’; and therewith the contradiction is instantly dissolved.5

It remains to review Leibniz’s relations to phenomenalism. This we take to be the theory that our knowledge of the world is mediated entirely by sense impressions; accordingly the only avenue to understanding the world is via statements of the effect of those impressions on our faculties. The chief demerit of this theory is, in our view, that human experience extends beyond sense impressions – for example our knowledge of intentionality as a *modus vivendi* of all creature life is not reducible to sense impressions, for these would not facilitate the recognition (as spontaneously we do) of another creature as a human being. It may be said safely, therefore, that although some of Leibniz’s specifications of monadic perceptions are phenomenalist in character, they occupy a relatively modest place in a larger scheme. In a word, phenomenalism is useful to Leibniz in certain specific contexts; but he was as capable as anyone of discerning an intellectual undernourishment that makes phenomenalism unfit for service in the construction of a comprehensive system.

**Overview of this Thesis**

**Prelude.** We begin with a brief conspectus of the youthful Leibniz’s handling of the problem of kinesis. This period is characterised by his decision to throw in his lot with the ‘moderns’ and with mechanism, although he showed, very characteristically, even at this early stage a peculiar affinity with the ‘ancients’. In particular he was inclined to the view that no man who philosophised seriously could get it completely wrong; and therefore it is more than probable that nuggets of gold would be found among them that even a commitment to the moderns will not efface. Accordingly we

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3 We note as a characteristic specimen a passage in Savile (2000), p. 104: “With this first positive identification of monads’ states as perceptions, Leibniz is firmly committed to the claim that the basic elements of any world (not just ours, but any other possible world too) can only be mental things.” With this basic claim Savile is on course of asserting that Leibniz whole monadological philosophy is an idealism. Our platform in this thesis is that Leibniz would not agree to this proposition.

4 It should be noted *en passant* that even such an arch-idealist as Fichte, who is frequently apostrophised as promoting an idiosyncratic form of solipsism, concedes very plainly the existence of an ‘external’, independent world. His criterion of *Anstoss*, by which the mind takes cognisance of objective objects, actually results in a ‘world in my mind’ as a form of experience unique to the individual subject. Although objects not known to me can then be said *not to exist* for me, the important qualification is for me. This does not bar the possibility of making their acquaintance, nor does it deny that they may well exist. But they are not part of the furniture of my mind.

5 For monads grouped together as organisms, there is indeed ‘a world’ external to themselves, and ‘discovery’ an adjunct of perception (esp. apperception).
discover in these years a somewhat unexpected (as well as highly idiosyncratic) juxtaposition and reconciliation between Anaxagoras and Hobbes.

The former supplied him with a conception of fundamental matter particles (homoiomera, spermata) which are administered a single ‘kick’ prior to their actualisation by a self-moving agency called nous to set them in motion. Thereupon the nous retires and plays no further role in the construction of the cosmos. For the moment his adoption of this idea remains sans issue; but it re-emerged in the thinking of the mature Leibniz with re-doubled force in the theory of a self-constructing cosmos which a sensitively attuned philosopher might perceive as being laid down as a seeding thought of Anaxagoras’ cosmology.

From Hobbes he took over the idea of conatus (which Hobbes named ‘endeavour’), and once again the kernel of a major principle was shaped here in embryo. For what Leibniz eventually gained from Hobbes was to be developed decades later as the ultimate unit of force, or monad – the representative of his final conception of force as the single progenitor of both mind and matter. Paradoxically this archetypal metaphysical principle emerged from the study of a philosopher whose final chapter in the Leviathan is a blistering attack on the useless and indeed ‘evil’ traits of metaphysics!

PART I, SECT. A commences with the unravelling of Leibniz’s selective adoption of Aristotelian and Scholastic notions. The first crack in his faith in the moderns appeared when he realised that extension and its modi, the locus classicus of the Cartesian definition of matter and understood by them as a necessary and sufficient account, failed to account for motion. A higher, metaphysical principle was in fact indispensable – hence his return to Aristotle and the Scholastics whose notions of substance, substantial form, primitive passive power and individuation could be emended and in this form absorbed into his own new conception. Crucial to this transformation was the reinterpretation of entelechy as a proto-corporeal substance, of secondary matter as mundane matter, of mass as a pure phenomenon and of bodies as aggregates of simple substances. These are unequivocal hints of working through these issues towards a double-aspect ontology; for we see in them a trend towards the separation of domains which belong, respectively, to physics and to metaphysics and thus require ultimately the provision of levels of description which, though never mutually exclusive, explain autonomous features each appropriate to one or the other of these domains.

Crucial to these probing is the concept of unity. Organic bodies qualify in virtue of their dominant monad, through whose activity they acquire substantial form. Leibniz’s disinclination to allow panpsychism comes to the fore in his denial of substantial form for inorganic bodies, even though they may contain corporeal substances. This stipulation conveys a first hint of his comfort with the idea of an infinite regress of substances; for it is the principle of organ-isation (an alias of co-operation) which facilitates differentiation of entities as true unities. However, this conception (of corporeal substances) is not altogether free of ambiguity; and Leibniz’s principle of pre-established harmony signals a crisis which is going to be resolved in a startlingly novel solution.

PART I SECT. B proceeds from the realisation which emerged from the foregoing, that the orientation of Leibniz’s ontological platform is from physics (natural philosophy) toward metaphysics, not the other way around. In itself this already insinuates that

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6 Leibniz (mis)understood these homoiomera as atoms.
7 In the sense that the New Theory of Physics of 1671 presents an account of the cosmos which its author repudiated when scarcely the ink had dried on it.
8 Leviathan, Part IV, “Of the Kingdom of Darkness”, ch. xlvi: “Of Darkness from Vain Philosophy and fabulous Traditions”.
realism and idealism stand in a relationship in which the former has priority, but lacks the power to deliver a comprehensive description. An exclusionary standpoint on each side of the fence is thereby revealed as a truncated philosophy. The autonomy and irreducibility of certain phenomena refutes both sides of the argument if they are held to deliver final conclusions. Leibniz is firm on the point, repeatedly and insistently, that no single level of description is able to claim full and comprehensive truth for its account.

Accordingly a double-aspect theory is indispensable. This leads us to the fundamental premise of Leibniz's metaphysics: *spirit and body lie in series*. The dual substance doctrine is an error. ‘Saving phenomena’ for Leibniz therefore entails an understanding that the world of physics and the world of metaphysics are each descriptions of aspects of an unbroken continuum of reality. Ineluctably this entails that the world is one; and that the mind’s perceptions do not compellingly promote idealism (let alone solipsism), but comprise realist, phenomenalist or idealist versions of the same single world. For mind and matter to ‘lie in series’ means nothing other than the truth that we cannot, so to speak in a single grasp of intuition, comprehend all its features: we are like mirrors which can be rotated to take in one aspect or another; and our conclusions as to the ‘whole’ is therefore an intellectual reconstruction of the perspectives delivered to us by these aspects.

This emerges most clearly from the phenomenotaxis which has been collated in this part of the thesis – apparently the first such exercise in the scholarly literature. What this tabulation reveals is the precise extent to which the mind is required to perform the task of imposing order on phenomena and the extent to which they are real, private, public, abstract, illusive, arbitrary or well-founded. An important adjunct is the concept of phase as that state in which an existent finds itself when being scrutinised under one of these aspects – i.e. an existent may be in liquid, solid or gaseous phase depending on the perspective of the observer.\(^9\)

In *PART II, SECT. C*, we engage with Leibniz’s conception of force. The chief contrast with Newton is that for the latter force rests on an operational definition of mathematical character and is associated with the laws of nature. For Leibniz, however, a unit of force is an existent. While this conception brought enormous and ultimately unmanageable methodological complexities in its train (cf. his abortive attempt to replace Newton’s theory with his own *Dynamica*), it is metaphysically a highly fecund, indeed protean conception. From the simple characterisation of this substance (aka monad) as force, the whole material and spiritual cosmos may be derived.

Existence therefore entails the exertion of its innate force. A monad exists when it acts: this is the default criterion of being. Accordingly *PART II, SECT. D* deals with the second prong of Leibniz’s ontology, which we have entitled ontology of agency. It is explained through the *Daseinstreben*, or ‘striving for existence’, that lies in the nature of a monad to exert and is the equivalent of individuation. For it must be understood that a monad does not yet exist at the moment of its creation: it may only claim a stake to existence; and this depends firstly on its own degree of ‘perfection’ and secondly on its compossibility within the total collective of striving monads.

God created monads as, so to speak, miniature versions of his own spirit. This implies that their freedom to act is guaranteed. When Leibniz therefore speaks of God’s “concession” of existence, this refers to the autonomous collectivisation of monads

\(^9\) Another significant issue to emerge is that none of this is compatible with a Kantian division between phenomena and noumena, nor indeed with later epistemic theories.
into universes eligible for actualisation. Following a hint by Catherine Wilson we read this as Leibniz’s theory of a self-constructing universe. It constitutes his emendation of Genesis, which has always been accepted as the creation of matter ex nihilo.

Self-evidently such a theory could not have arisen without a prior notion of necessity and contingency to separate predetermination from freedom of will. These criteria rest in turn on a prior understanding of the nature of differentiation as basic to individualisation and therefore as the source of a monodirectional information flow. As a counterpart to the schematisation of phenomena in Part I, this section therefore presents a schematisation of the ten main issues entangled in the conception of agency. ‘Being-consciousness’ and expression as the representation of the world may be interpreted as the sum of these issues; and in conclusion this section offers an analytical chart of the structure of monads.

Part II, Sect. E returns to considerations of corporeal substance. The determining criteria are found to be that (a) bodies are ensembles of individuals, but (b) such bodies require a dominant monad to be regarded as unities. This defines the dividing line between animate and inanimate bodies. To the former, self-evidently perhaps, the same rule applies as to individual monads: Dasein (being) is defined as activity, as agency – to be is to act, and to act is to be. This fundamental issue of the ‘primordial existential question’ serves ultimately for the segregation of material and physical existents. There are no atoms; or rather there are ‘true atoms’ (monads) which comprise the bedrock of existence and assemble both the material and the spiritual cosmos.

In Part II, Sect. F we double-back to the emergent phases of the ‘final’ version of Leibniz’s ontology of agency. As mentioned, freedom of the individual is the crucial criterion – indeed creation would lack the ultimate rationality which proceeds from God if his creatures were enchain’d in a predetermined configuration where living things merely ‘act out’ their script.

The lines of argument commence from Leibniz’s logical proposition of a complete concept, communicated in intricate detail to Arnauld. The complete concept is a full history of the subject, atemporal in God’s view and understood by God in its every tiniest ramification. But to propose this is the same as proposing God’s full foreknowledge and thus effectively to expunge freedom of action and choice from the subject’s complete concept. Leibniz took Arnauld’s vigorous objections seriously since, in particular, they also brought conflict into his own adverse position on determinism.10

During this period Leibniz came to understand that the very contingency disallowed by Spinoza breaks open the system of determinism. The mind’s powers of decision, especially its spontaneity in breaking equipollence, offer the first clue. The second clue was the logical circle involved in supposing God to decree that he would decree ad infinitum. The third and crucial clue came with the realisation that a complete concept involves non-terminating predicates, infinite convergences and so on, not merely as incidental but indeed structural, ever-present, ineradicable features. All three conduced to an understanding that the complete concept is in fact an impossibility, both logically and factually. For example it is futile and beyond all possible conception to interrogate a living entity on its ‘instantaneous system state’. In the outcome Leibniz replaced the complete concept with the law of the series. This involved a reorientation of the ‘sum of predicates’ doctrine to a doctrine of the system of monads as the princi-

10 In their correspondence Leibniz believed to have provided a sufficient loophole for the subject’s expressions of individual freedom, but realised not long afterwards that this was an inadequate platform from which to maintain this freedom, since the subject remains (albeit unwittingly) unfree from the point of view of God.
ple of organisation of the substance and its predicates. The substance, as an agent, engenders as part of its powers of choice the predicates which comprise its ultimate complete concept, which can not therefore be inspected at any instant prior to its consummation.

The idea is analogous to an algorithm. In this conception God creates each monad with its individual law of the series. Recalling that perception and appetition are the only qualities of a monad, this lends itself readily to the conception of the monad’s perceptions as the collection of asymmetrical and irreversible information relevant to its own being and the appropriate modification of its internal states. It will be perceived that in such a scenario freely executed choices are the best guarantees for avoiding indiscernibles. Though this could be interpreted as a diminution of God’s omniscience, Leibniz was prepared to admit it, since it is unnecessary for God to calculate all infinite series to their end, having in the act of creation set the boundary conditions for the evolution of the universe.

In PART III we move into the “Labyrinth of the Continuum” – Leibniz’s metaphysical laboratory. This is where the juxtaposition between realism and idealism, on which the double-aspect theory hinges, is ultimately resolved in the clear-cut segregation of perspectives on the phenomenal world as actual and the logical space of the labyrinth as ideal. Leibniz declares his colours unambiguously – realism concerns the world of objects and events, their properties and relations, while idealism concerns the realm of foundations.

Sect. G on the Principle of Continuity covers the vast range of indeterminate parts which serve as the foundations of real parts. For example the determinate notion of a point-like particle must here be resolved into the indeterminate notion of a metaphysical point: the former is measurable in principle but necessarily a compound; the latter unmeasurable because it is a true unit, but necessarily ideal. As such it may serve as the limit of real existents, but not as a ‘final’ part. Indeed the only logical conclusion can be that the whole notion of ‘final parts’ is illogical: there are no minima or maxima, only extrema.

Leibniz investigates these issues in a number of case studies. One of these – concerned with petites perceptions – has acquired relative celebrity as an anticipatory breakthrough in the psychology of consciousness. But the possibly most profound result (an outcome of his study of the rota Algazelis) is the startling realisation that the conception of an agent-in-motion has been mistakenly assumed to explain the traversal of an antecedently definable lattice comprised of temporal instants and spatial points. But an understanding of the true nature of the continuum yields the insight that no such lattice can possibly pre-exist: for time, space and thing-in-motion engender these points in their momentary aggregation. In other words, the points do not exist until assigned. They light up, so to speak, as definable points extracted from the amorphous continuum as they are actualised; and thus change can only be understood as an ensemble of these three integrated elements at the instant when this occurs.

Finally Sect. H on Shapes, Limits and Boundaries deals with the cognate issue of outlines as well as further considerations pertinent to the theory of the self-constructing universe. For Leibniz it was evident that phenomenal states represent the infolding and unfolding of order – for example a living body is such an infolded structure, which dissolves (unfolds) upon death, but does not destroy the elements (monads), only their configuration. All phenomenal existents are infinitely flexible in this sense, namely that their boundaries are not fixed, but in continuity with their environment.

11 Accordingly there can be no exact coincidence between a physical and metaphysical point. The latter, it will be seen, functions as a foundation, but cannot serve as a maximum/minimum.
Accordingly “there are no precise shapes in nature”; and what is perceived as the objects and facts of ‘our’ world would not so be perceived by an animate existent in a dimensional habitat different from ours (compare humans, body cells and microbes).

Self-organisation is more familiar to us today; but as a conception it was not foreign to Leibniz, whose models drawn from the continuum exhibit the multiplication of self-similarity in the proliferation of both material and animate existents and scale invariance among the features of his ‘Russian Doll’ universes. These, too, are innumerable; so that any of these existents which impinge on our consciousness are mere samples drawn from an infinite cosmos, although the principle of sufficient reason ensures that ultimately each perspective in the double-aspect theory is a valid (but not exclusive nor solely true) window on infinity. The heading that could be written across this entire chapter is Leibniz’s celebrated ‘minimax’ principle: that God so planned the world that the smallest number of laws would yield the greatest richness of phenomena.

PART IV is concerned with grounding existents; in other words, with the principle of sufficient reason, ontological arguments and the special problems Leibniz sought to solve in connection with this and the identity principle. There is a small CODA on Music, designed to illustrate that Leibniz with his philosophy did not stand alone. His principles are here set into the context of his musical scene and found to be interestingly mirrored in the practice of contemporary composers.

The virtue claimed in this thesis for the double-aspect theory is not only that it lifts the stigma of one-sidedness from accounts of Leibniz’s philosophy. Of much greater moment is the possibility of penetrating into the thought of an exceptionally deep enquirer into the relations between world and man through more than one, fairly restricted, portal. The widening of horizons is thus an enabling feature in the study of a system of philosophy which is surely among the most far-reaching such enquiries ever undertaken. The double-aspect theory, we believe, reveals a greater variety of facets, an inner coherence and especially an immense richness of thought than the more traditional insistence on just one primary aspect.