

Ecology of Monads

By Thibault De Meyer

Will Leibniz's philosophy turn us into ecologists? This is the bet of Pauline Phemister who, building upon Leibniz's theory of perception and of the interdependence of beings, shows that biodiversity is a form of beauty, and that its destruction impoverishes our experience.

An exhibition held at the Cartier Foundation in Paris until January 8th and devoted to the work of Bernie Krause has for a while been raising public awareness of the loss of biodiversity within natural areas. The artist has been recording the sounds of nature for over 45 years. With this sound collection, he allows us to listen to and to compare sounds from different parts of the world, before and after human intervention. In this way, the artist makes us sense how we humans often negatively affect ecosystems; he makes us perceive concretely that sounds are much less diversified today than in the 1960s.

Krause's approach is not unlike the one adopted by Pauline Phemister—Professor at the University of Edinburgh—in her latest book, in which she proposes to examine the possible contributions of Leibniz's philosophy to environmental thought, in its aesthetic dimension in particular.

The symphony of monads

Seen in the light of Leibnizian principles, the extinction of animal and plant species is in the first place an aesthetic loss, as the author underlines. Beauty, according to Leibniz, consists in a better perception of diversity within unity: the best of all possible worlds is, for him, the most beautiful of all worlds, that is, the most diverse world. Hence, following Leibniz, we can say that in the 1960s, our artist was able to have a rich, very varied and beautiful perceptual experience. By contrast, in 2015, this perception has lost much of its beauty, as it is less diversified.

Indeed, Leibniz builds his philosophical system on the notion of perception. A perception is a relation between the diversity of things perceived, and the unity of the perceiver. When I see a tree, at the same time I see (but maybe less distinctly) the grass at its foot, the clouds above it, the critters swarming on its bark; I hear the birds perched on its branches as well, but also the ones farther away hidden in other foliage; I smell a scent of humus, and maybe I feel the breeze that brushes my face at the same moment. All these and many other elements—whether they are more or less discreet in my sensation—contribute to the present perceptive experience. If the wind were slightly cooler or warmer, I would perceive the tree differently; its color, for instance, would seem livelier or duller to me.¹

By giving primacy to perception and thus opposing materialism, Leibniz offers a possible response to the question of why biodiversity should be preserved. In a purely materialistic framework, this question is difficult to answer: indeed, what allows us to consider that the chemical combinations that favor life are preferable to other inorganic combinations? As Thom van Dooren indicates, a materialistic philosophy struggles to explain why one should prefer albatrosses to the plastic waste that is eradicating them.² With Leibniz, it is possible to answer that it offers a spectacle that is more beautiful, that the perceptions it delivers are more beautiful. Building on Leibniz's philosophy, P. Phemister thus provides an aesthetic justification for the preservation of natural diversity.

However, we must listen to Krause's sonic work again. The show was more magnificent in 1960 than in 2015, because back then, there were more living beings singing and crying. But the animals do not simply play the sounds recorded by the artist the way a music box plays a melody. The animals creating the show perceive it at the same time, each its own way. Thus, the beauty of the show is multiplied as many times as there are perceivers (or monads, in Leibniz's vocabulary). And in 2015, there are less animals and the sounds they perceive are less diverse. The total beauty is thus reduced in two ways. Preserving biodiversity means preserving the beauty of perceptions on the one hand, but this beauty, Leibniz explains, is also increased by the numbers of perceivers who can appreciate it. Even if one can find an installation of plastic bags beautiful, such a work can never compete with the spectacle of nature, because in this case, the living beings increase the total beauty of the work by perceiving it from multiple points of view.

¹ The idea of unity of perception is easier to defend today than it was in Leibniz's days, since we are fortunate enough to have a rich literature in psychology that seeks to establish how, for instance, the color of a plate influences our taste experience of a food (Peter Stewart & Erica Goss, "Plate Shape and Color Interact to Influence Taste and Quality Judgments", *Flavor*, Vol. 2, No. 27, 2013). Even "small perceptions"—non-conscious perceptions—are part of perception as a whole, since without these small perceptions, the perception as a whole would be different.

² Thom van Dooren, *Flight Ways. Life and Loss at the Edge of Extinction*, New York, Columbia University Press, 2014, chapter 1 (see my review [<https://lectures.revues.org/17599>] for *Lectures*)

Ecological value

P. Phemister examines Leibniz's aesthetic reflections and relates them to those of contemporary philosophers of ecology or "ecophilosophers", such as Allen Carlson. She examines the concept of value, which is often used by the advocates of this philosophical current. The latter often defend the idea that natural beings have an intrinsic value, regardless of any extrinsic or instrumental value. The author notes that the distinction between intrinsic and extrinsic value is irrelevant in Leibniz's philosophy, since his conception of identity is prominently relational.

According to Leibniz, indeed, each monad perceives, though in varying degrees of clarity, all the other monads. In this way, all the monads express one another. In addition, a monad is defined by the series of all its perceptions. Without the finch singing on a branch near my window, my perception would be different; without this bird, I wouldn't quite be myself anymore, since one perception in the full series of my perceptions would have changed. In order to be myself, I need all the other beings. Thus I do not have an intrinsic identity independently of the other beings contributing to my perceptions—which produce my identity.³

As a result, in Leibniz's philosophical system, a being has value only insofar as it allows others to exist. The finch I hear has value to me only because it participates in my perceptions and thus in my identity. However, this bird also participates in the perceptions of many other beings. It participates in the perceptions of the other members of my family, but also in those of the other birds in the neighborhood. In a less distinct way, this finch can also participate in the perceptions of the passerby in the street, in those of the insects nearby or of the dogs in the building next door... Even if it is not on an auditory level, the plants also feel the air vibrations caused by the bird singing. For all these beings as for me, the finch has value only insofar as it participates in their perceptions.

For this reason, a being has all the more value when it participates in the perception of a greater number of beings. One of the consequences of the mutual expression of all the monads is that the intrinsic value of a being is at the same time an extrinsic value. Phemister then challenges the ecophilosophers who defend the idea that certain beings have a purely intrinsic, non-relational value:

³ Leibniz asserts that "The monads have no windows through which something can enter or leave." (*Monadology*, Section 7). This statement is often understood as the idea that monads do not have relations with one another, but this affirmation must be taken in its context. In this passage of the *Monadology*, Leibniz criticizes the scholastic explanation of perception, since it conceives perceptions as being caused by the outside. Leibniz claims that the relations are not exterior to the monads, but that they form the very identity of these. The perceptions specific to each monad are indeed defined by Leibniz as a relation between the internal unity of the monad and the multitude external to it. The monads therefore have an intimate relationship with the outside, even if this relationship does not take place on a physical level, but on an expressive level.

“Indeed, an ecological philosophy that failed to appreciate the interconnectedness of living things would not be worthy of its name. In light of this, the idea that an ecological theory of intrinsic value should be couched in terms of the *nonrelational* properties of things begins to look decidedly at odds with itself.” (p. 104)

Therefore, she finds the relational conception of value she builds with Leibniz more relevant for ecophilosophy.

Other concepts

We have just pointed out two possible ways of linking Leibnizian perspectivism to current ecophilosophy. This perspectivism gives us a reason to defend biodiversity: it ensures the beauty of the life spectacle and allows a greater number of beings to perceive it. Moreover, this perspectivism emphasizes the interconnectedness of all beings, since each being participates in one way or another in what others perceive. Leibniz then, according to P. Phemister, makes it possible to construct a concept of value that is richer and more adapted for ecology.

The author also shows that by drawing upon Leibniz’s ideas it is possible to defend bioegalitarianism—that is, the idea that all living beings (humans, animals, plants, bacteria, plankton etc.) are equal “in principle”, since every living being has perceptions (however confused they are) and participates in the perceptions of others; each living being enriches the world. P. Phemister specifies that bioegalitarianism is worthy in principle since, in the event of a conflict of interest, those who have the liveliest perceptions (and Leibniz considers that humans have better perceptions than the other animals) should be favored.

A somewhat stricter discussion of this restrictive clause would, however, have been valuable. One could namely wonder what kind of interests should be taken into account: can we prefer the convenience brought to humans by the use of plastic bags to the survival of albatrosses, to quote van Dooren’s example? The conflicting interests are often unbalanced and difficult to compare.

P. Phemister also provides a creative redevelopment of the relational conception of time and of space defended by Leibniz. The latter argues in favor of such a conception in his controversy with Samuel Clark, a relative of Isaac Newton. His argument is therefore highly metaphysical. However, P. Phemister links Leibniz’s views with certain social and cultural conceptions of time and space. A space does not exist independently of the relations that are cultivated in it (my apartment would not be the same if other people lived in it). Similarly, an ecosystem is essentially relational; it develops as beings meet. When a forest is destroyed, billions of relationships built over more or less long periods are destroyed at the same time.

Finally, P. Phemister takes up the guiding principle of Leibnizian ethics and frames it in the context of current ecological debates. According to Leibniz, morality starts with “putting oneself in the place of the other” (quoted p. 148). Leibniz only applied this principle to situations involving humans exclusively, because he restricted the domain of morality to beings endowed with reason. Phemister does not question the attribution of reason to humans alone. She nevertheless proposes to generalize the moral principle inviting us to put ourselves in place of the other, in order to approach our interspecific ethical relationships: if I were an albatross, how would I perceive the plastic waste in the ocean? If I were a capuchin, how would I perceive large-scale slaughter? If I were a penguin, how would I perceive the melting of the ice? The author suggests that we should even try to put ourselves in the place of plants, amoebae or other microorganisms. This stretching of the imagination makes it possible to increase concretely the number of points of view we take into account when we deliberate in order to act.

From the 17th century to the present

In much the same way as an anthropologist such as Philippe Descola manages to set the terms of ecological issues in a different way by considering them from a distant perspective,⁴ P. Phemister manages to think the ecological disaster in an original way thanks to an immersion in past philosophy. The author’s reflection is all the more welcome that Leibniz’s thought, unlike that of Spinoza, has until now attracted little attention from ecophilosophers.

As the author explains in the first chapter of her book, these two philosophers of the seventeenth century show some affinities, namely because they both give a great deal of importance to the interconnectedness of beings.⁵ P. Phemister, however, considers that the central proposition of *Ethics* according to which the substance is one—God or nature—is problematic. Following what was in fact the main criticism Leibniz addressed to the philosopher of Amsterdam, she suggests that this idea does not leave much room for genuine individual action. According to the author, the philosopher of Leipzig is ultimately more relevant when it comes to thinking about our relationships with the human and non-human beings that make up our ecosystems, and in order to change our actions accordingly.

While Phemister, in her earlier work, defended an interpretation of Leibniz’s philosophy without attempting to relate it to our present problems,⁶ in her latest book she adopts a freer stance towards interpretative accuracy, making it easier to build bridges between

⁴ Philippe Descola, *The Ecology of Others*. Prickly Paradigm Press, 2013, Translated by Geneviève Godbout and Benjamin P. Luley.

⁵ The book coordinated by Raphaële Andraut, Mogens Lærke and Pierre-François Moreau on *Spinoza/Leibniz. Rencontres, controverses, réceptions* (PUPS, 2014) provides detailed studies of the points of agreement and disagreement between these two philosophers (see my report for Lectures [<https://lectures.revues.org/17894>]).

⁶ See in particular her book, *Leibniz and the Natural World. Activity, Passivity, and the Corporeal Substances in Leibniz’s Philosophy*, Berlin, Springer, 2005.

Leibnizian philosophy and ecology. For instance, as we already noted, she includes all living beings in the realm of ethics, whereas Leibniz restricted it to humans alone.

When P. Phemister brings closer Leibnizian perspectivism and a familiar conception of the body—in which it exists regardless of the fact that it is perceived or not; in this conception, the body predates perceptions—it is probably also in order to link the 17th-century philosopher's thought to the present world. In this sense, the author asserts on several occasions that the perspectives are built through particular bodies. Even if some passages in the philosopher's work suggest this idea, it seems to us that in Leibniz's theory, perceptions precede bodies, if not on a temporal level, at least on an ontological level: the bodies result from them.⁷ It is precisely because it gives so much importance to perspectives and perceptions that Leibniz's philosophy seems interesting. But in trying to put the body back in the center—a little artificially—are we not also taking the risk to impoverish this philosophy?

In the end, beyond the historical criticism that could be made against it, this book by P. Phemister makes it possible—as we are going through an unprecedented ecological crisis—to reactivate one of the most original philosophies of our tradition in a particularly relevant and lively way.

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⁷ To read a book in defense of Leibniz's idealism (which we would rather see as a form of perspectivism) see Donald Rutherford, « Leibniz as Idealist », *Oxford Studies in Early Modern Philosophy*, vol. 4, p. 141-190, 2008.