

Reply to Cover's Review of *Leibniz's Theory of Relations*
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Cover's very stimulating remarks offer me the opportunity to attempt to clear up certain aspects of my interpretation of Leibniz's theory of relations. I will first address the more important issues raised by Cover; then, at the end of these notes, I will offer one major reason for my own dissatisfaction with my book.

Russell closely connects Leibniz's thesis that relations are "merely mental things" with the claim that the fundamental form for every proposition is that of subject-predicate: in Russell's view, it is this claim that leads Leibniz to a nominalistic account of relations. To this, I object: (1) that from a logical point of view there is no reason why an adherent of nominalism should deny the existence of propositions in relational form; and (2) that in the scholastic and late-scholastic traditions, both nominalists and realists recognize the subject-predicate form as the fundamental form of sentences. Cover agrees with (1) and finds puzzling that later in the book I consider it "reasonable to suppose that Leibniz is consistent with his own 'nominalist' convictions and holds a 'quasi-reductionistic' view of relational sentences." I think, however, that (1) can be considered true in principle and that one can also have particular reasons for maintaining a sort of reducibility thesis. First of all, I hope to have demonstrated that, by virtue of (2), most logicians during the scholastic and late-scholastic periods shared a kind of reductionist approach towards relational sentences, independent of their ontological positions. The dominance of the Aristotelian tradition, with its emphasis on the central role of syllogism, induced many logicians to undertake the task of compressing into syllogistic form inferences involving relational properties—i. e., properties concerning two or more subjects. On the one hand, this would seem to be a partial confirmation of Russell's claim that the preeminence attributed to the subject-predicate form is indeed relevant to the reduction of relational sentences; on the other hand, it clearly shows (contrary to Russell's claim) that not all attempts to reduce relational sentences to sentences in subject-predicate form necessarily imply a nominalistic account of relations. In fact, it is Leibniz's propensity towards nominalism that determines his reductionism concerning relational sentences. But because of (1) above, an acceptance of nominalism does not imply, in itself, a reductionistic account of relational sentences: this reductionism is the result of an attempt, on Leibniz's part, to construct a language which rigorously reflects the ontological structure of reality.

As is well known, Leibniz conceives reality as composed of individual substances with their individual modifications. Given a sentence such as "Socrates is wiser than Plato," we see that it does not adequately reflect the real structure of the world, insofar as it conveys the idea that a unique property, corresponding to "wiser than," links two different substances (Socrates and Plato). The sentence "Socrates is wiser than Plato" is in fact a contraction of a more complex sentence which has the general structure "Socrates is P * Plato is Q," where 'P' and 'Q' refer to individual modifications of Socrates and Plato respectively and '*' corresponds to a syncategorematic expression which denotes a link between the sentences "Socrates is P" and "Plato is Q." In the case of relational sentences involving symmetrical relations (similarity, for instance), Leibniz proposes an analysis which rests on traditional scholastic doctrine. Given the sentence "Socrates is similar to Plato," Leibniz interprets it to mean: "There is a property P such that Socrates is P and Plato is P" (and for that reason Socrates and Plato are similar with respect to P). Leibniz explains these analyses as an attempt to show that relations are reducible to truths: "I prefer to think of relations as truths resulting from the constitution of things, rather than as beings" (cf. N. Jolley, "An Unpublished Leibniz MS on Metaphysics," *Studia Leibnitiana*, VII/2, 1975, p. 188). Thus Leibniz emphasizes that relations which subsist between or among two or more particulars are neither properties nor accidents of any sort.

Nevertheless, if relations are "truths resulting from the constitution of things," two problems arise, as Cover rightly points out: (a) In what sense can Leibniz maintain that relations have a mere mental reality if they spring automatically from the existence of the related subjects? (b) How can Leibniz consistently uphold that they depend only on God's intellect and not also on God's will, given that the existence of individual substances and their modes is dependent on God's will? The first question admits a standard answer, given by authors of the late-scholastic period. For the sake of clarity, consider every relation as composed of two different parts: an objective and a subjective part. The objective part is represented by individual beings with their modifications—for example, Socrates and Plato, each with a certain degree of whiteness. The subjective part is the mental entity which corresponds to an act of understanding by means of which the related individuals are considered together. If Socrates and Plato both exist with their whiteness, then all the objective conditions for the resulting relation of similarity between them (with respect to whiteness) are given. However, these conditions are necessary but not sufficient for us to understand the relation of similarity. We are able to conceive of this relation only if we grasp, with a single act of understanding, Socrates and Plato together with their individual whitenesses. Wanting to characterize the mental

activity by which we conceive relations, Leibniz coins the verb *concogitare* (to think-together). As a result of this activity, we think of relations in terms of single properties which simultaneously connect several subjects. This twofold nature of relations is clearly recognized by Leibniz when he writes that the relation “can be named being of reason, even though it is, at the same time, a real being” (LHIV, 3, 5c, Bl. 2r). Thus, commenting on chapter 12 of Jungius’ *Logica*, where Jungius states that there is a kind of relation which ceases to exist as soon as we stop thinking of it, Leibniz observes that such relations cannot even be imagined (VE, p. 596). All the ambiguities we find in Leibniz’s texts concerning the nature of relations are easily explained if we consider that he, on different occasions, emphasizes the objective or the subjective aspect of relations. The objective aspect is represented by the conditions which result in relations, whereas the subjective aspect is the relation as it is understood in our minds.

Question (b) admits two different answers. If relations result, as Leibniz states, from the constitution of things, because it is God who constitutes all existing and all possible things, it seems quite natural to conclude that not only God’s understanding but also God’s will determines, at least partially, the relations among individuals. Concerning this point, I do not consider effective Cover’s recourse to a distinction between possible and actual individuals (and relations). If God structures the world, then, even if this world is only a possible world, he determines all the possible relations among possible individuals. And so God’s will and not only God’s understanding contributes in this way to the “resulting” of relations. Leibniz, in his commentary to Temmik quoted by Cover, clearly recognizes this fact. But I think that when Leibniz says that relations do not depend on God’s will, he is simply repeating a standard argument which can be traced back to Aristotle—i. e., that relations cannot be changed without changing the related subjects (their modifications or properties). If God creates two white things, he cannot make them dissimilar with respect to color. Once God has put together the complete concepts of the individual substances composing a (possible) world, he cannot alter any or all of the relations among the individuals except by changing the individuals themselves.

Concerning the more general issue raised by Cover at the end of his review, it seems to me that a nominalist in the proper sense of the world—if anyone knows what a proper nominalist is—cannot accept the proposed reduction. Rejecting relations and instead introducing sets and sets of sets, etc., does not seem to be a very substantial step towards nominalism. Furthermore, Cover may undermine Leibniz’s attempt, in his essay on rational grammar, to reduce relations to syncategorematic expressions—i. e., to terms which do not have meaning in themselves. But, perhaps

Leibniz would have accepted the proposed reduction, emphatically warning that sets are “merely mental things.” This leads me to the final comment I would like to make about my book and about Leibniz’s theory of relations. A distinctive characteristic of Leibniz’s thought is his attempt to reconcile philosophical contraries. Thus, for instance, in the moral field, he tries to combine free will and determinism; and in ontology he professes a kind of mild nominalism wedded with a realist conception of the ideas in God’s mind. In my book I tried to show the consistency in Leibniz’s views in the field of logical ontology, but I think I would have done better to dwell more on the inconsistencies of Leibniz’s treatment of relations and relational sentences.