

# Ideas and Self-Reflection in Leibniz\*

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## I

The term “idea” in the seventeenth century is notoriously difficult. Not only does each major thinker have their own understanding of “idea”—many of those thinkers themselves move ambiguously between different meanings. This confusion is generally attributed to Descartes. While ideas had only existed in the mind of God, Descartes consciously made new use of the term by applying it to things in human minds. At the same time, Descartes left many questions about what an idea is. Given Descartes’ own ambiguity, the various doctrines of ideas developed by Arnauld, Malebranche, Locke, Spinoza and Leibniz, all have some legitimate claim as interpretations of Descartes.<sup>2</sup>

Compared with these Cartesian ambiguities, Leibniz’ doctrine of ideas appears relatively clear. Leibniz wrote several short but explicit accounts of ideas, and the “Discourse on Metaphysics” and the *New Essays* have significant discussion of ideas as well.<sup>3</sup> Because of these explicit accounts, Leibniz’ theory of ideas is usually given unproblematically as one of “dispositions” or “faculties,” as if this were a sufficient account of ideas. Clearly such an account is not sufficient, unless accompanied by some account of what dispositions are for Leibniz, and the existence of dispositions in a monad presents difficulties. In a similar way, the connection between innate ideas, reflection, and necessary truths is often taken as unproblematic. Nicholas Jolley, however, particularly emphasizes the difficulties involved in Leibniz’ account of this connection.<sup>4</sup> In this paper, I will first examine what an idea is for Leibniz, and then use this account to explain Leibniz’ doctrine of self-reflection. In both cases, I will focus on the relationship between his theory of ideas and the rest of his philosophical system. What Leibniz says about ideas is fairly clear—the difficulty is determining what he means and how his claims fit with his conception of monads. In order to address these latter difficulties, I will begin by examining three broader factors in Leibniz’ theory of ideas.

## II

1) *Thinking of a thing does not necessarily mean having an idea of that thing.* In the “Discourse on Metaphysics,” Leibniz makes a distinction between notions or concepts, and ideas: “Thus, the expressions in our soul, whether we conceive them or not, can be called *ideas*, but those we conceive or form can be *notions*,

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*concepts*.” (DM 27; GP IV, 452; AG 59) More often Leibniz draws a distinction between having an idea of a thing and thinking of a thing. (GP VII, 263; L 207) This distinction has important consequences. If all mental events are ideas, then to say that a thought is an idea is trivial—all thoughts are ideas. If, however, ideas are a narrower subset of thoughts, to say that a thought is an idea can have some meaning and normative value. In the seventeenth century, philosophers were reluctant to give up the normative function of the term “idea.” One common way to retain some normative value for ideas was through a distinction between words and ideas, which Locke, for example, makes.<sup>5</sup> Thus sometimes we seem to think of something, when really we are only contemplating words.

Leibniz follows this distinction between words and ideas, but his additional distinction between ideas and concepts or notions allows a much greater normativity. We must always ask if we have an *idea* of the thing we are thinking of. Ideas differ from mere notions because they must be possible, i.e. not self-contradictory. Leibniz writes, “Now, it is evident that we have no idea of a notion when it is impossible. And in the case where knowledge is only *suppositive*, even when we have the idea, we do not contemplate it, for such a notion is only known in a way in which we know notions involving a hidden impossibility [*occultement impossibles*].” (DM 25, GP IV, 450; AG 56) Some ideas are simple and are intuitively known to be possible, and thus we can immediately recognize them as ideas. More often, analysis is required in order to recognize that something is possible, so that we must analyze our *notion* in order to ascertain if it is really an *idea*. For this reason, Leibniz says that Descartes assumes we have an idea of God, meaning that Descartes assumes God is possible.<sup>6</sup> For his proof to work, Descartes must establish that the *concept* he has of God really is an *idea*.

We distinguish between ideas and concepts on logical grounds—ideas are known through finite analysis not to be contradictory and thus to be possible, while concepts have not been so analyzed. The distinction between them is however deeper than this method of recognition shows. Ideas are known to express something real, even if not existing in the created universe. Ideas express possibles existing in the mind of God. This relationship is explicit in Leibniz’s earlier writings. In the “Meditations on Knowledge, Truth, and Ideas,” Leibniz writes that our ideas must be “affections or modifications of our mind corresponding to that very thing we perceived in God.” (GP IV, 426; AG 27) In the “Discourse on Metaphysics,” he writes that “the essence of our soul is a certain expression, imitation, or image of the divine essence, thought, and will, and of all the ideas comprised in it,” (DM 28; GP IV, 453; AG 59) and that the mind expresses “God and, with him, all

possible and actual beings.” (DM 29; GP IV, 453-54; AG 60) We find similar statements in the *New Essays*, where Leibniz writes that “the soul is a little world where distinct ideas represent God and confused ones represent the universe.” (NE II, i, §1; RB 109) Later Theophile adds that it is in God that one finds “the pattern [*l’original*] for the ideas and truths engraved in our souls.” (NE III, xi, §14; RB 447) That the object of our ideas is God’s understanding explains why in the *Theodicy* Leibniz says that without God geometry would have no *object*, rather than just saying that geometry would not be possible or have no necessity, (T §184; GP VI, 226) and why in the “Causa Dei” he says that the mind of God contains all possible *objects* of the understanding. (CD §13; GP VI, 440) In any case, it is clear that possibilities have some existence, and these are the objects of our ideas in the same way that created things are the objects of our senses.<sup>7</sup>

In conclusion, if a notion expresses something that is not contradictory and is thus possible, then this notion expresses something real in the mind of God, and thus this notion is an idea. If a notion expresses something impossible, it expresses something with no reality at all, and thus is not an idea. The distinction that Leibniz makes between real and false or chimerical ideas fits this criterion exactly. In the “Meditations on Knowledge, Truth, and Ideas,” he writes “an idea is true when its notion is possible and false when it includes a contradiction.” (GP IV, 425; AG 26) He retains this definition in the *New Essays*, where he argues that an idea is real when it is possible, whether or not it refers to something actually existing. (NE II, xxx, §1; RB 263) This claim follows because what an idea expresses need not be in the realm of existing things but may also be in the realm of possibles. Thus a real idea is an idea with a real object, as we would expect, but this object can be ideal rather than created. A “false idea” really means a notion that seems to be but is not an idea. There are strictly no “false ideas.” Thus in the previously mentioned criticism of Descartes, Leibniz says that Descartes assumes he has an idea of God, rather than saying that Descartes assumes the idea he has of God is real. A chimerical idea is no idea.

2) *Everything a monad experiences is innate.* One of the central tenets of Leibniz’ mature philosophical system is that monads do not interact and that nothing new ever enters a monad. Leibniz’ response to the debate about innate ideas is that not only are all ideas innate, all concepts and all perceptions are also innate. The problem is that Leibniz often speaks as a Copernican speaks of the sun rising—as if some thoughts were not innate. He does this particularly in the *New Essays*, where he accommodates himself to Locke’s language. There, he gives an explicit warning of this double use of terms—

Now the new system takes me even further; and—as you will see later on—I believe indeed that all the thoughts and actions of our soul come from its own depth and could not be given to it by the senses. But in the meantime I shall set aside the inquiry into that, and shall conform to accepted ways of speaking . . . and the outer senses can be said to be, in a certain sense, partial causes of our thoughts.” (NE I, i, §1; RB 74)

Leibniz is here referring explicitly to the term “*idée innée*.” He gives a similar warning in the *Theodicy*. (T §290; GP VI, 284)

If all thoughts are innate, what is Leibniz talking about in his debate with Locke? This question can best be answered in terms of another common Leibnizian distinction, between perception and apperception. Leibniz uses “perception” in a very broad sense, so that all simple substances, even those making up a stone, can be said to have perception. When perception is consciously recognized it is more properly called apperception. This distinction leads to some confusing terminology, because we often take perceiving something to mean noticing something, or consciously perceiving something. For example, in the *New Essays*, Philalethe says that certain bodies make impressions on us which are not strong enough to call forth perception; Theophile answers that it would be better to distinguish between perception and apperception. (NE II, ix, §4; RB 134) We must thus be careful not to take Leibniz to be arguing that ideas can be in us unperceived. He seems to argue this sometimes because Philalethe uses “perceive” when he should use “apperceive.” Leibniz agrees with Philalethe that there can be nothing in us that is not perceived, but he does not take this to entail that there can be nothing in us of which we are not conscious, as Philalethe does.

If all ideas are in us already, the question becomes—how do these ideas come into apperception? In discussing innate ideas, two issues are involved—where ideas come from or how we *perceive* ideas, and how ideas come into consciousness or how we *apperceive* ideas. On the first question, all ideas are in us to begin with, and there is no popular sense in which ideas come from outside us. On the second question Leibniz uses popular terminology, discussing what we can learn from self-reflection as opposed to reflection on the world. He makes these two issues clear in the “Discourse on Metaphysics,” where he argues that metaphysically speaking, no ideas come from outside us. In concession to Aristotle, though, we can say that some ideas come from the senses, although we cannot say that all ideas do. (DM 27; GP IV, 452; AG 59) Some stimulus is required for us to bring ideas into apperception. Sometimes this stimulus comes from the senses, and sometimes it comes from self-reflection. There are two arguments here, one that no

ideas come from outside of us, and another that not all ideas are awakened or learned from the senses. These two arguments are equally present in the *New Essays*. As an example of the first, Theophile asks Philalethe “But how could the senses and experience provide the ideas? Does the soul have windows? Is it similar to writing tablets, or like wax?” (NE II, i, §2; RB 110) In this case, Leibniz argues his basic position that monads do not interact. An example of the second argument is when Theophile asks, “I would like to know how we could have the idea of being if we did not, as beings ourselves, find being within us.” (NE I, i, §24; RB 85-86) Here, he must be speaking in the same sense that he could ask, how could I ever have an idea of a cat if it had never been suggested to me by some experience? That is, he is asking not how the idea of being could come into him, but how he could come to think of the idea of being if he never experienced it.

3) *A monad's only qualities are its perception.* Leibniz' metaphysical system requires this proposition. Leibniz' account of monads and even his proof for their existence, is based on their simplicity. Perception, as the unity of consciousness, is the only model for such simplicity, and thus all simple beings must consist of perception. In addition, Leibniz explicitly says that all the qualities of a monad exist in its perception. In the “Principles of Nature and Grace,” Leibniz writes that a monad can only be distinguished by its internal qualities, “which can be nothing but its *perceptions* (that is, the representation of the composite, or what is external, in the simple) and its *appetitions* (that is, its tendencies to go from one perception to another) which are the principles of its change.” (PNG 2; GP VI, 598; AG 207) In a letter to DeVolder, he writes, “I recognize monads that are active per se, and in them nothing can be conceived except perception, which in turn involves action.” (GP II, 256; Rescher 1991, 80) Moreover, the reason Leibniz claims that monads never stop perceiving, is that without perception, a monad would have no qualities and would thus not exist. (M 21; GP VI, 610, AG 216) This would not be the case if beside perceptions, monads were differentiated by something else.

### III

With these three factors explained, we can turn toward the first question—what are ideas? Robert McRae analyzes the doctrines of ideas in the seventeenth century, arguing that Descartes' use of “idea” yielded three interpretations—an idea as an object, an idea as an act, an idea as a disposition.<sup>8</sup> He attributes the latter view to Leibniz.<sup>9</sup> McRae's account provides an adequate starting point, as Leibniz consciously distances his conception of idea from two alternatives which roughly correspond to those McRae proposes. Against Arnauld, and Locke in the *New Essays*, Leibniz denies that an idea is merely an act, form, or part of thought. He

writes, “If ideas were only the forms or manners of thoughts, they would cease with them; but you yourself have acknowledged, sir, that they are the inner objects of thought, and as such they can persist.” (NE II, x, §2; RB 140) In the preface, he writes that “This is how ideas and truths are innate in us—as inclinations, dispositions, tendencies, or natural potentialities, and not as actions.” (RB 52; cf. NE I, i, §26; RB 86) Leibniz’ connection of ideas and truths in this passage is relevant, as it is largely the fact that being an idea carries some normative value that causes Leibniz to reject making ideas the same as thoughts.

Leibniz opposes his conception of idea to Locke’s, by making ideas a narrower subset of notions or mental acts, so that ideas can play a normative role in our thinking, and by making ideas permanent in us. Malebranche’s account of ideas is opposed to Locke’s on the same ground, but Leibniz distances himself from Malebranche as well. He rejects the claim that ideas are something existing outside our mind. In “What is an Idea?” Leibniz simply defines an idea as “something which is in our mind.” (GP VII, 263; L 207) This definition excludes from the start Malebranche’s view that ideas are perceived in God. Ideas are something that we have. They are entities of our own mind. Leibniz supports this claim with the principle of preestablished harmony. Even if we do perceive ideas in God, these ideas must have some effect on us, and we must have “not little copies of God’s [ideas], as it were, but affections or modifications of our mind corresponding to that very thing we perceive in God.” (GP IV, 426; AG 27)<sup>10</sup> In the “Discourse on Metaphysics,” Leibniz strengthens this position with reference to his account of a substance. Because a substance contains from the beginning everything that will happen to it, if our perception of ideas in God has some effect on our mind, then this effect is contained in us from the beginning, and in this sense we can say that we have the idea in ourselves. (DM 29; GP IV, 453-54; AG 60)

Leibniz does not merely provide an alternative to Locke and Malebranche, but rather tries to unite the two. Thus he wants to retain both the normative power of Malebranche’s account and the naturalism of Locke’s account. The question then is, what is the position of such ideas in our consciousness? Ideas are neither merely acts of the mind nor things existing outside the mind. McRae’s answer is that they are “dispositions,” with a disposition as something in us, but not a thought that would come and go. In this choice of terms, McRae follows Leibniz himself, who calls an innate idea “a disposition, an aptitude, a preformation.” (NE I, i, §11; RB 80) Later he says that they “are merely natural tendencies [*habitudes naturelles*], that is dispositions and attitudes, active or passive.” (NE I, iii, §20; RB 106) The problem is that habits, dispositions, and aptitudes all seem like things that have a

non-perceptual existence. Leibniz' most common metaphor for innate ideas—veins in marble—also suggests that innate ideas are something outside perception. The latter is, however, a metaphor, and the question is how strongly to take it. A block of marble is used metaphorically by Leibniz in another telling sense—as an example of a being by aggregation, and thus not a real substance. The metaphor of veins in marble, or spatial patterns in an aggregate, can only be loosely applied to a simple being that has no parts, is a true unity, and is not extended.

Leibniz' use of "habits," "dispositions," and "aptitudes" to describe innate ideas must be taken in a peculiar sense placing them within a unitary substance whose only qualitative differentiation is in its perception. Otherwise, innate ideas could only be mine in a different sense, in a sense of aggregation, or in the sense that my body is mine. In differentiating himself from Malebranche, however, Leibniz specifically claims that our ideas are part of us, or contained within a monad. The problem remains that ideas are something existing in us that do not fluctuate with our acts of thought, but can only exist in our perception, which seems to say, that they can only exist as acts of thought. Leibniz, however, has a ready explanation for how innate ideas could be *perceived* by us continuously while being *recognized* by us only occasionally—the distinction between perception and apperception. Ideas exist in our perception always, but they are only sometimes brought into apperception, in acts of thought which come and go.<sup>11</sup>

Given Leibniz' theory of monads, we can understand a disposition in two ways, as we can conceive change in a monad in two ways.<sup>12</sup> Appetition is the tendency of one perception to lead to another and is thus the principle of change in a monad. Since all the actions of a monad are determined, we could then say that if our appetitions will eventually lead us to apperceive a particular idea, then we have a disposition towards that idea. This interpretation fails in the case of ideas, however, because Leibniz says that we have these ideas as dispositions even if we will *never* apperceive them, or if our appetitions will never in fact lead us to these ideas. While appetition is the principle of change in a monad, all the changes in a monad take the form of certain ideas becoming more or less clear, or moving into or out of apperception. We could also say then that to have a disposition towards an idea is to perceive that idea, and potentially apperceive it. Thus we would have a disposition towards this idea, even if we never actually apperceived it. This seems to be the only possible sense in which Leibniz could call an idea a disposition.<sup>13</sup>

The same difficulties involving the status of innate ideas involves the status of memories, and memory must consist in actual present traces of the past. The

expression of the complete universe in the present moment of perception shows how this possible—"the present is pregnant with the future; the future can be read in the past; the distant is expressed in the proximate." (PNG 13; GP VI, 604; AG 211) Just as the future can be read in the past, the past can be read in the present, and only exists as present traces, mostly unconscious, but perceived. In the *New Essays*, Theophile gives this interpretation of memory directly—"there are dispositions which are the remains of past impressions, in the soul as well as in the body, but which we are unaware of except when the memory has a use for them." (NE II, x, §2; RB 140) A soul cannot lose its past—"it retains impressions of everything which has previously happened to it, and it even has presentiments of everything which will happen to it." (NE II, xxvii, §14; RB 239) Thus memories are the perceptions of past events which remain in the present, and the ability to remember is the ability to apperceive these weak perceptions. Because Leibniz treats memories and innate ideas as having the same status, it follows that innate ideas also exist only as presently perceived. Such a status does not seem like a "disposition," but in the above passage about memory, Leibniz does say that memories are *dispositions* which are remains of past impressions. At least in this case, then, Leibniz does use disposition to refer to what is perceived but not apperceived.

In conclusion, going beyond the vague term "disposition," we can say that ideas are the perceptions or expressions of possibles, in the same way that confused notions are perceptions or expressions of created things. Likewise, in the same way that, given preestablished harmony, my perception of anything I will ever perceive is contained in me from the start, so are my perceptions of possibles, or my ideas. In the same way that while I perceive all existing things, the real task of learning is to bring these perceptions into apperception, so I perceive all ideas, and the task is to bring them into apperception. This is precisely how Leibniz describes our relationship to innate ideas. Ideas are in us "not always so that we are aware of [*apperçoive*] them, but always in such a way that we can draw them from our own depths and bring them within reach of our awareness [*rendre appercevables*]." (NE IV, x, §7; RB 438) As Theophile tells Philalethe, "I cannot accept the proposition that *whatever is learned is not innate*," and this is the key point in Leibniz' account of innate ideas. (NE I, i, §23; RB 85) Given the distinction between perception and apperception, it is possible to learn—to bring into apperception—what we already perceive, or what is innate in us.<sup>14</sup>

## IV

Given this explanation of ideas, we can now turn to Leibniz' account of self-reflection. Nicholas Jolley says the doctrine "has generally been regarded as an

embarrassment, and with good reason,”<sup>15</sup> and claims that “Leibniz does not achieve a coherent view of the relation between the reflection and disposition accounts of innateness; either he simply conflates them or he implies that they cannot both be true.”<sup>16</sup> According to Jolley, Leibniz gives two accounts of innate ideas. The first is taken up by McRae, which is that innate ideas are dispositions. The second is that innate ideas are a product of self-reflection. Jolley takes these as two accounts of how we acquire ideas, in which case they are in tension and even contradiction.<sup>17</sup>

Leibniz’ statements about innate ideas and self-reflection are sometimes contradictory and certainly unclear. I want to argue that this difficulty comes not from inconsistency in Leibniz’ account nor from conflation, but rather from the use of the same ambiguous terms for several different distinctions. The crux of my argument is that Leibniz uses “innate” in several senses, and that the accounts of ideas as dispositions and as products of reflection are accounts of two different things. We have already seen that in acquiring ideas, two issues are involved—where ideas come from or how we *perceive* ideas, and how ideas are brought into consciousness or how we *apperceive* ideas. My claim is that ideas as innate dispositions refers to the first question, while ideas as innate from self-reflection refers to the latter question. If so, then Leibniz uses “innate” ambiguously, referring to perceiving from ourselves and to apperceiving from ourselves. Leibniz’ ambiguous use of the term “innate” has already been shown. Admittedly, in the *New Essays*, Leibniz warns that he will use the term in one sense, the popular sense, and my account depends on his failure to stick to this one meaning. In this warning, however, Leibniz not only does not say that he will use this one meaning *throughout*; he says that his real account will come out later. Moreover, an examination of the *New Essays*, shows clearly Leibniz does not and cannot limit himself to the popular sense of the debate. If Leibniz does use “innate” ambiguously, then the accounts of innate ideas as dispositions and innate ideas as coming from self-reflection can be seen as explanations of two different things, rather than two competing explanations, in which case they are neither in tension nor contradiction.<sup>18</sup> We can begin by examining these two senses of innate.

1) Strictly speaking, everything that will ever happen to us is innate. Theophile warns Philaethe that this is his real view. (NE I, i, §1; RB 74) Given the interconnection of things, at least the whole created universe affects us and is thus innate to us, and Leibniz implies that all possible things affect us as well and are thus innate to intelligent minds. All ideas, as well as all thoughts and all actions, are innate. Translating this account into terms of self-reflection, we can say that all

ideas, as well as all thoughts and all perceptions, are discovered through introspection. Strictly speaking, there is only self-reflection for a monad. To say that all things, including existing things, are acquired (in the sense of brought into apperception) from self-reflection is somewhat empty and is counter-intuitive but it is the metaphysically rigorous way of speaking given Leibniz' conception of substance. Given that my experience of a horse is included in me, the idea of a horse awakened from that experience is derived from myself. Leibniz rarely speaks of self-reflection in this way, but does so, for example in "What is an Idea?" where he writes that we have the ideas of things only because God "has impressed a power of thinking upon the mind so that it can by its own operations derive what corresponds perfectly to the nature of things." (GP VII, 264; L 208)

2) Leibniz concedes to Locke that experience is necessary to awaken any of our ideas.<sup>19</sup> That is, some experience is necessary for us to bring any idea into apperception. This experience can be divided into two kinds—we can come to apperceive these ideas either with the help of the senses, or through the experience of our self. This distinction corresponds to Locke's distinction between ideas of sensation and ideas of reflection, and Leibniz points out this similarity.<sup>20</sup> A second group of ideas that can be called innate then are ideas that are embodied in our self, or which can come into apperception from self-reflection alone. In fact, many ideas, such as that of substance or unity, can only come into apperception from our experience of our self, since we never experience substance through the senses. Leibniz makes this distinction when he says the only exception to the claim that all things in the soul come from the senses is the soul itself, and thus "the soul includes being, substance, one, same, cause, perception, reasoning, and many other notions which the senses cannot provide." (NE II, i, §2; RB 111) I think it is in this sense also that Leibniz speaks of the soul as veined marble rather than a blank tablet.

These ways of using innate correspond to what Jolley calls the accounts of innate ideas from dispositions and innate ideas from self-reflection. Because they are meant to answer two different questions—How do ideas come into our perception? and How do ideas come into our apperception?—they are not logically inconsistent, and I believe this explanation frees Leibniz from the charge of conflation. It is clear, however, that these two accounts are not enough to explain Leibniz' theory of innateness. First, Locke and Leibniz both miss the point of the historical debate on innate ideas. On the first account, Leibniz is left with the rather unenlightening claim that all ideas are innate, the idea of this particular horse as well as the idea of a triangle. On the second account, Leibniz is left with the claim

that Locke himself agrees with—some ideas come into apperception through self-reflection. Now, Leibniz may be trying to broaden Locke’s account of reflection,<sup>21</sup> but his claim that some ideas are innate in this sense poses no fundamental threat to Locke and skirts the real issue. The second problem is that we are left with Leibniz’ puzzling connection of innate ideas and necessary truths. On the first account, both necessary and contingent truths are innate. The second account appears to do better, but forces us to conclude that the necessary truths of geometry are not innate, while contingent psychological truths about our mind are innate. Leibniz, however, explicitly connects the special status of necessary truths to their innateness, and given my account so far, this connection would be groundless. Jolley focuses his criticism on this very point in trying to show the inadequacy of the reflection account of innate ideas. These problems lead us to posit a third sense of innate, based on a third distinction. This third sense of innateness arises out of the two-fold division we have seen so far, because Leibniz answers the second question, of how we bring ideas into apperception, by using self-reflection in two ways, corresponding to two distinctions.<sup>22</sup> We have seen that Leibniz distinguishes *a posteriori* self-reflection from reflection on things outside us. We might better call such self-reflection “self-observation.” Leibniz, however, also uses self-reflection to capture a different distinction, between ideas which come *a posteriori* from experience and those which come *a priori* through the understanding. This distinction corresponds to that between contingent and necessary truths. Thus we must recognize a third sense of innate, as coming into apperception through *a priori* reflection.

3) All thoughts are innate, but some refer only to possibles, while others have two referents—a possible existing in the mind of God and an existing thing which God created according to that possible. In other words, some things we can only have ideas of, but others we can both have ideas of and perceive through experience. A triangle is an example of the former, while a particular horse is an example of the latter. In general, this distinction is a distinction between what we learn by the understanding alone, and what we learn from experience, either from the senses or from self-reflection. This distinction is also a variation of Leibniz’ distinction between necessary and contingent truths. Necessary truths about possibles are known to us analytically by the principle of non-contradiction. They are thus known *a priori*, without experience or the senses. In fact, they can only be known *a priori*, since instances from experience can never generate necessary truths. In theory, contingent truths can also be known analytically *a priori*, but as this analysis requires infinite knowledge, human beings cannot carry it to comple-

tion. Such thoughts can only come *a posteriori* from experience.

This distinction, between thoughts coming *a priori* through the understanding and those coming *a posteriori* through experience is clear, but mapping this distinction onto a distinction regarding innate ideas is more difficult. To say that an *a priori* idea is innate and an *a posteriori* idea is not innate is a slight abuse of terms, because either both kinds of ideas are innate, as dispositions in me from the beginning, or neither are innate, as having referents outside of me (the first referring to the world and the second to a possible existing in the mind of God.) The connection between innateness and necessary truths thus requires some justification. The main support for this connection is that it is the only way Leibniz can avoid seriously contradicting himself. Leibniz clearly connects necessary truths and innateness, but he just as clearly says that no experience—even of our own self—can yield necessary truths. Just like sense experience, experience of our self can only provide instances, and we can never know that what is true of our mind is necessarily true. Necessary truths are more than psychological necessities and thus cannot be established through self observation. Leibniz says explicitly that necessary truths cannot come from induction, but several other factors support this claim. First, Leibniz' skepticism about experience extends into the psychological realm. Our mind might, after our death, be elevated to a level of knowledge now inconceivable. This possible but inconceivable elevation puts into question any psychological necessities we now experience. The existence of higher spirits with radically better understanding has the same function. Second, self-reflection also produces confused ideas. Leibniz criticizes Locke—"In my opinion he [Locke] has not adequately distinguished the origin of necessary truths, whose source is in the understanding, from that of truths of fact, which are drawn from sense-experience and even from confused perceptions within us." (NE I, i, §1; RB 75) Here, Leibniz is distinguishing between the second and third senses of innate. Necessity is not connected with self experience, which can yield confused perceptions just as external experiences can, but is rather connected with the understanding. Finally, even the most basic and certain truth of our experience of our self—that we exist—is not necessary. It is *certain*, but it is not *necessary*, for one thing, because it is not necessary that I exist. (NE IV, vii, §7; RB 411) If my very existence is not necessary, then it seems that anything I observed of myself would also not be necessary. The very fact that self-observation cannot yield necessary truths means that geometrical objects must be innate in a different sense.

We can also note a few things about Leibniz' terms, which support this interpretation. While we cannot properly call the idea of a triangle innate in a way differ-

ent from our idea of a particular horse, since both are already contained in us as monads, we could accurately say that the former is not derived from the senses, or that it is derived from the understanding, both in contrast to the idea of a particular horse. Leibniz says, for example, that the ideas of space, figure, movement, repose, and other ideas that are usually attributed to the senses “come rather from the common sense, that is, from the mind itself; for they are ideas of the pure understanding . . .” (NE II, v; RB 128) or that “we always have all our pure or distinct ideas independently of the senses.” (NE II, i, §23; RB 119; cf. NE I, i, §11; RB 81)<sup>23</sup>

Even if Leibniz did designate *a priori* truths as innate in distinction to *a posteriori* knowledge, he would have some historical justification. The debate about innate ideas was really a debate about whether or not all knowledge comes from experience. To establish this point, it is worthwhile to look briefly at the historical debate on innate ideas in Locke and Descartes. When Descartes divides ideas in the “Third Meditation,” what remains as innate is somewhat ambiguous—would ideas coming from psychological observation be adventitious, or innate? We should note two things, however. First, whenever Descartes describes how we recover innate ideas, he refers to a process of reasoning rather than self-observation, which suggests that innate ideas refer to *a priori* truths rather than *a posteriori* conclusions from self-observation.<sup>24</sup> Second, most, if not all, of the innate ideas Descartes lists cannot come from self-observation. The idea of God is the most forceful example, since the *Meditations* rest on the claim that this idea cannot be derived from our self.<sup>25</sup>

While the relationship between reflection and innate ideas is somewhat unclear in Descartes, Locke clearly distinguishes the two issues involved. He recognizes that some ideas come to us from self-observation while others come from sensation, and he sees this recognition as no threat to his stance against innate ideas. The issue lies elsewhere for him. His criticism of innate ideas is entirely focused on *a priori* knowledge, principles like “’Tis impossible for the same thing to be, and not to be,” or “That the whole is bigger than a part.”<sup>26</sup> In commenting on Locke in the *New Essays*, Leibniz’ real view is that all thoughts are innate, but in addition he wants to argue that not all ideas are brought into apperception by experience. Some—necessary truths—can only be known *a priori*, through the understanding. In this debate, it would thus be natural—if a little inexact—to call such ideas innate, particularly since Leibniz warns that he will be using popular terms, as we have seen.

In conclusion, we can divide Leibniz’ use of ‘innate’ according to the following

scheme:

- A. Innate as always already perceived in us, as dispositions (first sense).
- B. Innate as coming into apperception from self-reflection:
  - coming from *a posteriori* self-observation (second sense);
  - coming from *a priori* reflection (third sense).

In practice, it is often difficult to determine which of the latter two senses Leibniz is using. Nonetheless there is an important distinction. In the second sense, ideas from self-reflection are innate as coming *a posteriori* from our experience of our self. In the third sense, intellectual ideas are innate as *a priori*. These are easily confused because both are unreachable from the senses, but for different reasons. In the first case, the idea of unity cannot come from experience of the senses, because we never experience unity with the senses. Our only experience of unity is our experience of our self. In the second case, truths about geometry cannot come from the senses because necessary truths cannot be induced from experience.

#### V

With these different senses of innate, Leibniz' statements can be made logically consistent. More importantly, the contexts of Leibniz' statements bear out this consistency and these various terminological ambiguities. Thus when Leibniz says that all ideas, or even all thoughts, are innate, he means it in the first sense. When he says that some ideas, like unity and being, are innate because we have an experience of them in our self, he means it in the second sense. When he says that all necessary ideas are free of the senses, or derived from the understanding, he means it in third sense. The most important point is that the account of innate ideas as dispositions and the account of ideas as the products of self-reflection refer to the acquisition of ideas in different senses. With the recognition that these are accounts of two different things, the conflation that Leibniz seems guilty of disappears.<sup>27</sup>

The greatest difficulty with this account, however, is that Leibniz grants *a posteriori* self-reflection a privileged position in our knowledge, and even connects it with necessary truths. This privileged position must be explained if my account of Leibniz' theory of ideas is to be accepted. First, we have noted the difficulty of distinguishing the different senses of self-reflection. Thus many times when Leibniz seems to privilege self-observation (the second sense of innate), he actually intends self-reflection as the *a priori* use of the understanding (the third sense of innate). We can take an example from the *New Essays*. Philalethe says that there cannot be innate truths, because truths are dependent on ideas, and ideas come

from the senses. Theophile answers that there are also ideas which do not come from the senses but rather from “la reflexion de l’esprit.” He then says that ideas from the senses are confused and yield only confused ideas, while the “intellectual ideas, and the truths depending on them, are distinct, and neither originate in the senses.” (NE I, i, §11; RB 81) If Leibniz were here saying that necessary truths come *a posteriori* from our experience of our self, taking self-reflection in the second sense, he would contradict his frequent claims that necessary truths cannot come from induction. If, however, he means self-reflection in the third sense, then his account is consistent. That this is the sense he intends is further suggested by his emphasis on self-reflection in contrast to the senses, and his reference to the ideas from self-reflection as intellectual ideas, which suggests something broader than what can come from our experience of our self, including, for example, geometrical objects.

Leibniz’ statements specifically privileging self-reflection as self-observation can be divided into two kinds. The first connect the ability to be self-aware with the ability to perceive necessary truths. A strong statement of this connection is in the “Discourse on Metaphysics”—non-rational substances differ from minds in that “they do not know what they are nor what they do, and consequently, since they do not reflect on themselves, they cannot discover necessary and universal truths.” (DM 34; GPIV, 459; AG 65) In this statement, the ability to know necessary truths seems a consequence of our ability to reflect on our self. We should note that Leibniz does not say necessary truths come from self-reflection, but that one ability implies the other. In the “Monadology,” Leibniz continues to link the two, but directs the causality in the other direction—because we can know necessary truths, we are different from animals and can be elevated to self knowledge. (M 29-30; GP VI, 611-12; AG 217) As we have seen, Leibniz cannot be deriving necessary truths from self-reflection, as the first passage suggests and the second passage contradicts. On closer examination, the cases in which Leibniz links self-reflection in the second sense, as self-observation, with the ability to know necessary truths, as in these two quotations, can be taken as psychological claims about abilities rather than claims that truths of self-reflection are derived from necessary truths, or vice versa. That is, a being which has the capability to reflect on itself will also have the capability to apperceive necessary truths.

Self-reflection in the second sense does have some privileges over knowledge from the senses, and these form the second set of claims. First, the self is a universal object of experience. Ideas that can be discovered from our experience of our self are more universal—everyone in the world has the experience of a being,

whereas not all have the experience of ice. Second, Leibniz gives a special status to our *a posteriori* experience of our self as generating primitive truths which are not necessary but are certain. For example, the claim that I exist is certain, though not necessary. Third, Leibniz connects distortion or perspective with existence in space. Our direct, non-spatial access to our self either means that it is not perceived in space because it is particularly clear, or it is particularly clear because it is not perceived in space. In either case, self-reflection has a special status.

## VI

The advantage of this account of Leibniz' view of ideas and reflection is that it frees Leibniz from the charge of obvious self-contradiction, accusing him rather of an understandable use of ambiguous terms. More importantly, it shows that Leibniz offers an attractive, consistent, and subtle account of consciousness, which I believe still has relevance today. Nonetheless, this account is not unproblematic, because Leibniz occasionally moves so easily between the different senses of innate. In conclusion we can look at one of the most problematic passages, from the *New Essays* (NE I, i, §24, RB 85-86).<sup>28</sup> Leibniz begins with the claim that innate ideas and innate truths must be learned. The example he gives are the "truths about numbers." He then digresses into a discussion of the method of demonstration. The problem comes with an interruption. I will quote the passage at length:

*Phil.* But might it not be that not only the terms or words that we use, but also our ideas, come from outside us?

*Theo.* If they did, we too should have to be outside ourselves; for intellectual ideas, or ideas of reflection, are drawn from our mind. I would like to know how we could have the *of being* if we did not, as beings ourselves, find being within us.

*Phil.* What do you say, sir, to this challenge which a friend of mine has offered? If anyone can find a proposition whose ideas are innate, let him name it to me (he says); he could not please me more.

*Theo.* I would name to him the propositions of arithmetic and geometry, which are all of that nature; and among necessary truths no other kind is to be found. (NE I, i, §24, RB 85-86)

Everything in this passage suggests that Theophile is speaking of innate ideas in the third sense, as necessary truths, except for the claim that we could not have an idea of being if we ourselves were not beings, which clearly refers to the second sense of 'innate'.

Logically, this passage is acceptable, if we admit that Leibniz is talking about two different things—ideas that are embodied in us and ideas that can only be

reached *a priori* through the understanding. Nothing depends logically on Leibniz using 'innate' in the same sense throughout the passage. Nonetheless, the fact that Leibniz in no way marks his transition between two different accounts suggests that he does not distinguish them. In interpreting such a passage, however, we face two unattractive choices. If Leibniz switches between two different accounts, we must admit that he is writing in a misleading and even careless way. If, however, Leibniz uses innate in the second sense throughout, then we must assume Leibniz fails to realize that his claim entails the absurd conclusion that we can only know the truths of arithmetic and geometry because we embody these truths ourselves. The goal of this paper has been to argue for the former, more generous, alternative.

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*Notes*

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<sup>2</sup> Robert McRae gives an overview of these developments starting with Descartes in his article "'Idea' as a Philosophical Term in the Seventeenth Century." (McRae, 1965) Nicholas Jolley covers the same territory more thoroughly in *The Light of the Soul* (Jolley, 1990). Both of these sources have been very helpful in formulating the issues in this paper. Mark Kulstad's subtle discussion of reflection has also been helpful. (Kulstad, 1991)

<sup>3</sup> Leibniz discusses ideas most notably in the essays, "What is an Idea?" (1678) and "Meditations on Truth, Knowledge, and Thought" (1684). While these are early essays, there is no reason to think that Leibniz changes his view, as he never repudiates it nor presents an alternative, and as late as the *New Essays* he contin-

ues to refer readers to the "Meditations on Knowledge, Truth, and Ideas."

<sup>4</sup> Jolley (1990), p 172.

<sup>5</sup> Locke discusses the use of words which have no accompanying idea, and the problems resulting from such use (III, x, §2; N 490-91).

<sup>6</sup> For Descartes, the question of whether or not we have an idea of God is a phenomenological one, and can thus be made from the condition of complete doubt. For Leibniz, mere self-observation can tell us that we have a *notion* of God, but can never tell us that this notion is an *idea*, or, what is the same thing, that this notion expresses something possible.

<sup>7</sup> In this account, I partly agree with Benson Mates, but Mates claims that ideas are in God only as dispositions or capacities, so the objects of geometry only potentially exist in the mind of God, a fact which strengthens the case for Leibniz' nominalism. I am claiming rather that ideas at all times exist in the mind of God, as actively understood, so that the objects of geometry have a permanent existence. Mates (1986), p 245-46.

<sup>8</sup> McRae (1965), p 175.

<sup>9</sup> Hans Burkhardt also begins with Descartes, dividing Descartes' use of ideas into two kinds. Sometimes an idea is a psychological capacity, in which case it can be an actual mental event (a thought) or a potential event (a disposition). At other times, an idea is the content or object of a thought, which can either come from experience or can be innate. Burkhardt carries this division forward to Leibniz, leaving out only ideas from experience. Thus, Leibniz sometimes considers ideas as the content or object of a mental event. At other times, he considers ideas as mental events themselves. At yet other times, he considers ideas as potential mental events, or dispositions.

<sup>10</sup> In this passage, Leibniz seems very favorable to Malebranche. It is no *less* true that we perceive ideas in God than that we perceive existing things. Leibniz' criticism of Malebranche here would apply just as well to all perception.

<sup>11</sup> This is the conclusion that C.D. Broad also reaches. Broad (1975), p 134-35.

<sup>12</sup> Broad suggests a third view, when he writes, "It is a dispositional proposition that, *if and only if* at any time its temperature should be at or above 1062° C, it would then be liquid." (Broad, 1975, p 20-21) Broad later says, however, that all dispositional properties must reduce to non-dispositional ones. In addition, such dispositional properties seem to come only from the limitations of our perspective. Since the entire future of a monad is determined, it only has determinate properties, such as, at time t, this bit of gold reached a temperature x and became liquid. Finally, it is difficult to see how such a hypothetical proposition would constitute

something actually in a monad as a disposition.

<sup>13</sup> Following Broad, Jolley notes that dispositions must reduce to non-dispositional properties, and he connects these to unconscious perceptions, but concludes, “Leibniz holds that from a description of a mind’s unconscious experiences, together with the laws of psychology, we could infer that it would have the conscious thought of a triangle under certain specifiable conditions.” (Jolley, 1990, p 162) In my account, an idea is not something to which unconscious perceptions lead, which would make a disposition a form of appetite. Rather, an idea is itself an unconscious perception.

<sup>14</sup> With this description of what an idea is, we can expand on Burkhardt’s analysis. Burkhardt attributes three conceptions of ideas to Leibniz, based on a division between the act of thought and its object, and a division between a potential thought and an actual thought. Both of these divisions now appear problematic. Regarding the distinction between an idea as an act of thought and as the object of that thought, ideas must be actively perceived within a monad. Thus an idea can exist as an object only in an act of thought. At most, then, Burkhardt’s distinction between ideas as acts of thought and as objects of thought is a distinction within one and the same event. Regarding Burkhardt’s second division, a potential thought can only be an actually perceived idea. The division between actual thoughts and potential thoughts is rather a division between ideas perceived and ideas apperceived. We could also say that potential ideas are actually perceived and potentially apperceived.

<sup>15</sup> Jolley (1990), p 182

<sup>16</sup> Jolley (1990), p 185

<sup>17</sup> Jolley (1990), p 185. Jolley notes that the doctrine of self-reflection is adequate as an attempt to justify Leibniz’ claim that we can know that the mind is a substance, but that it fails as a theory of idea-acquisition. It is this latter charge against which I wish to defend Leibniz here.

<sup>18</sup> The assumption that Leibniz uses innate in only one sense underlies Jolley’s criticism. He writes for example “Thus the explanation offered by the reflection account is in reality circular; it explains the acquisition of an idea on the assumption that we already have the idea in question.” (Jolley, 1990, p 186) Jolley’s explanation of what is going on is exactly right, but Leibniz’ account is not circular, because Leibniz is giving an account of two different things. Self-reflection brings ideas into *apperception*, and this does presuppose that these ideas are already *perceived*, or are in a strict sense innate.

<sup>19</sup> He writes, “Experience is necessary, I admit, if the soul is to be given such and

such thoughts, and if it is to take heed of the ideas that are within us. But how could experience and the senses provide the ideas? Does the soul have windows?" (NE II, i, §2; RB 110) This passage first shows Leibniz' concession to Locke of our dependence on experience, but it also shows that with this concession Leibniz is only talking about bringing ideas into apperception, not the ultimate origin of our ideas.

<sup>20</sup> Preface to NE; RB 53

<sup>21</sup> See Kulstad (1991), p 122.

<sup>22</sup> cf. Broad (1975), p 139.

<sup>23</sup> Jolley takes the existence of geometrical objects as intellectual objects that are not derivable from the self to show the flaw of Leibniz' account of self-reflection. (Jolley, 1990, p 185) On the account here, geometrical objects can be said to be innate and even derived from the self in either the first or third sense of innate.

<sup>24</sup> For example, responding to Hobbes, Descartes writes, "As for the further point that we do not have an idea of the soul, but rationally infer its existence, this amounts to saying that although there is no image of the soul depicted in the corporeal imagination, we nevertheless do have what I call an idea of it." (AT 183; CSM 129) In this passage, Descartes shows that we reach the innate idea of our self, not by examining our self, but through reason.

<sup>25</sup> A letter to Mersenne has a typical list—"others are innate, such as the idea of God, mind, body, triangle, and in general all those which represent true, immutable and eternal essences." (AT III, 383; CSMK 183) In this list, only the idea of mind might be attained by self-observation, but its place on a list of items that cannot come from observation and its connection with eternal essences show that Descartes is not talking about self-observation, but what is known *a priori*.

<sup>26</sup> Locke, I, ii, §4; N 49, and , I, iv, §6; N 86.

<sup>27</sup> cf. Jolley (1990), p 183-85

<sup>28</sup> Jolley cites this passage as evidence for Leibniz' confusion of the two accounts, along with two other passages. One of these (RB 51) poses the same problems as the passage here considered, only Leibniz slides from using 'innate' in the second sense to using it in the first sense. The second passage Jolley cites (RB 78-79) can be read consistently as using 'innate' in the third sense.

## IDEAS AND SELF-REFLECTION IN LEIBNIZ

### Abbreviations

- AT: *Oeuvres de Descartes*. Ed. by C. Adam and P. Tannery. Revised edition, Paris: Vrin, 1964-76.
- CD: G. W. Leibniz. *Causa Dei*. Cited by section number. Original text in GP VI.
- CSM: R. Descartes. *The Philosophical Writings of Descartes*. Ed. and tr. John Cottingham, Robert Stoothoff, Dugald Murdoch. Vol. 2. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994.
- CSMK: R. Descartes. *The Philosophical Writings of Descartes*. Ed. and tr. John Cottingham, Robert Stoothoff, Dugald Murdoch. Vol. 3. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994.
- M: G. W. Leibniz. *Monadology*. Cited by section number. Original text in GP VI; translation in AG.
- N: Locke, John. *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding*. Ed. Peter Nidditch. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1979. Cited by book, chapter, section, and page.
- RB: G. W. Leibniz. *New Essays on the Human Understanding*. Ed. and tr. Peter Remnant and Jonathon Bennett. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981.

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