

Creatural action and passion and their relation with perfection

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1. Introduction

The theme of perfection forms the backdrop upon which Leibniz conceives of creatural action and passion. In this regard, the most famous lines are probably those which are found in *Monadology*: «The created being is said to *act* outwardly insofar as it has perfection and to *suffer* from another insofar as it is imperfect. Thus *action* is attributed to a monad insofar as it has distinct perceptions, and *passion* insofar as it has confused ones»¹. Given these interconnections, I chose to explore in my doctoral research Leibniz's theory of action through the lens of his concept of perfection.

It is well known that Leibniz distinguishes simple substances from aggregates, soul from body, monads from animals². However, given the perpetual union between soul and body that Leibniz often claims³, I attempted to study creatural actions and passions – that is, actions and passions of corporeal substances – focusing in particular on the simple ones. On the one hand, this choice was necessitated by Leibniz himself, insofar as he conceives of action in terms of *perception* and, in his view, only simple substances are capable of it⁴. On the other hand, I think my approach is allowed and supported by his theory of preestablished harmony, which posits an immediate and parallel correspondence between the simple and the aggregate. From this point of view, monads and bodies are different

¹*Monadology* §49, in L. E. Loemker (eds.), *G. W. Leibniz Philosophical Papers and Letters*, Kluwer Academic Publisher, Dordrecht / Boston / London 1969, p. 647. Similar definitions also appear in other writings, such as *Discourse on Metaphysics* and *New Essays on Human Understanding*. In the former, Leibniz asserts: «Therefore when a change takes place by which a number of substances are affected (as a matter of fact, every change affects them all), I believe it can be said that any substance which thereby passes immediately to a greater degree of perfection or to a more perfect expression exercises its power and *acts*, while any substance which passes to a lesser degree of perfection shows its weakness and *suffers* (*Discourse of Metaphysics* §15, in *Ibid.*, p. 313). Furthermore, in *New Essays* he writes: «But if we take 'action' to be an endeavour towards perfection, and 'passion' to be the opposite, then genuine substances are active only when their perceptions (for I grant perceptions to all of them) are becoming better developed and more distinct, just as they are passive only when their perceptions are becoming more confused» (*New Essays on Human Understanding*, Cambridge University Press, 1996, pp. 134-135).

²On this subject, the letter to De Volder of 20 June 1703 is renowned. In this letter, the author lists the different “layers” of creatures: primitive entelechy and primary matter which together form monads; the aggregate of several monads which form the second matter; and finally, the animal or corporeal substance

³See *Monadology* §72; *New Essays on Human Understanding*, Preface, cit., p. 19; *Reflections on the Doctrine of a Single Universal Spirit*, in L. E. Loemker (eds.), *G. W. Leibniz Philosophical Papers and Letters*, cit., p. 556.

⁴See, e.g., *Monadology* §17: «If we pretend that there is a machine whose structure enables it to think, feel, and have perception, one could think of it as enlarged yet preserving its same proportions, so that one could enter it as one does a mill. If we did this, we should find nothing within but parts which push upon each other; we should never see anything which would explain a perception. So it is in the simple substance, and not in the composite substance or machine, that perception must be sought» (in L. E. Loemker, *G. W. Leibniz Philosophical Papers and Letters*, cit., p. 644).

“aspects” of the same object. We can decide to explain reality and phenomena through the realm of final causes or through the realm of the efficient causes. I chose the former.

2. Towards the original perfection of monads

I began my research by focusing first of all on Leibniz’s notion of perfection. Thus, I observed that this term does not bear a single meaning throughout his works. I identified two principal senses: the first interprets perfection as reality or principle; the second, as quality or predicate⁵. Given the subject of my inquiry, I considered perfection in terms of quality. Indeed, perfection is that whose change corresponds to the action or passion of a substance. Furthermore, as reality, perfection is conceived as lacking limitation, while creatures are always – even though in various ways – limited.

The next step was to explore this quality. Since it is something susceptible of increase or decrease, perfection must be – in a certain sense – a permanent and enduring characteristic of monads. I could have resolved the issue by referring to what Leibniz writes in *On the Radical Origin of Things*: only what is more perfect exists, and to be perfect is to imply the greatest variety in unity, therefore monads – which are existent individuals – are perfect because they imply the highest possible multiplicity. This definition is of course correct, but within my research it is unsatisfactory, because it does not explain precisely *how* perfection pertains to substance. Indeed, if it is something capable of change, then there must be in it something that subsists and remains constant and something that changes. Thus, I thought that a more general investigation into the nature of monads might have been more fruitful. I therefore attempted to clarify the perfection of monads by analyzing their fundamental attributes and constitution.

From Leibniz’s perspective the principal characteristic of substances is action. In the *Specimen Dynamicum* he for example claims that «the character of substance is to act»⁶, and *On Nature Itself* he writes «that which does not act, which lacks active force, and which is despoiled of all distinctiveness and even of all reason and ground for subsistence can in no way be a substance»⁷. Moreover, he conceives action not simply as change, but rather as spontaneous change: each monad

⁵In fact, it is maybe impossible to draw a sharp distinction between these two groups of meanings. For instance, the statement in *Monadology* §41 («perfection being nothing but the quantity of positive reality taken strictly, when we put aside the limits or bounds in the things which are limited») describes perfection first of all as reality, but this same definition can be used to describe a quality – indeed, at the end of the sentence, Leibniz refers explicitly to things. The same can be asserted regarding *On the Ultimate Origination of Things*, where perfection is conceived as a quality of things («that all possible things, or things expressing an essence or possible reality, tend toward existence with equal right in proportion to the quantity of essence or reality, or to the degree of perfection which they involve; for perfection is nothing but quantity of essence») and at the same time it constitutes the principle used by God to create the world.

⁶*Specimen Dynamicum*, in L. E. Loemker (eds.), *G. W. Leibniz Philosophical Papers and Letters*, cit., p. 435.

⁷*On Nature Itself, or on the Inherent Force and Actions of Created Things*, in *Ibid.*, p. 507.

is for him «a mirror of the universe» whose attributes and modifications are simply the results of its being. As a consequence, substances are also conceived as metaphysically independent⁸.

The source of all of these qualities (action, spontaneity, and independence), which are fundamental and distinctive of substance, is a «a certain act or entelechy»⁹ or «primitive motive force»¹⁰ which for Leibniz is «itself the inherent law impressed upon it by divine command»¹¹. Each monad is therefore constituted by this law or divine decree: that is, the principle of perfection. Nonetheless, this sketch of the constitution of monads is still incomplete. Each substance is indeed characterized also by primary matter or primitive passive force¹²: in short, it is limited, and from this aspect descends the possibility of evil. Following the interpretation of Maria Rosa Antognazza and Shane Duarte¹³, I understand primary matter as non-being or negation. Nonetheless, as Roberto Celada Ballanti has argued this does not imply a domesticated concept of evil: «What emerges, rather, is the idea of a privation from which descend, in some way and even though “accidentally”, an action and a force, the idea of a power that “carves out” within the monad not empty spaces (since for Leibniz there is no *vacuum*), but at least dark folds, increasingly obscure, opaque, and non-transparent»¹⁴. In line with Leibniz himself, who in *Theodicy* describes evil as «darkness»¹⁵, I conceive of primary matter as a shadow that obscures the richness and perfection contained in every creature.

Now, since monads are constituted by both entelechy and primary matter – i.e. by the divine decree of perfection, from which follows the best of the possible world, and by limitation – we can assert their simultaneous perfection and imperfection. They are perfect in a more original, primal or metaphysical sense, and imperfect in a more “physical” or derivative sense. I identify perfection with a more fundamental quality of substances not because I deny that limits are primitive and original like entelechy – Leibniz, after all, refers to *primary* matter and *primitive* passive force – but because these limits lack ontological consistency, and then they are not to be understood as something positive – if that were the case, monads would not be simple but aggregates. Now, while the divine decree of perfection is the rule followed by God in creating monads and it is what “shapes” creatures in an

⁸ «One particular substance never acts upon another particular substance, nor is it acted upon by it, if we keep in mind that what happens to each is solely the result of its own complete idea or concept, since this idea already includes all the predicates or events and expresses the whole universe» (*Discourse of Metaphysics* §14, in *Ibid.*, p. 312).

⁹ *On the Correction of Metaphysics and the Concept of Substance*, in *Ibid.*, p. 433.

¹⁰ *On Nature Itself*, in *Ibid.*, p. 503.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, p. 504.

¹² See *On Nature Itself*, in *Ibid.*, p. 503; Letter to De Volder 20 June 1073, in *Ibid.*, pp. 530-531.

¹³ M. R. Antognazza, *Primary Matter, Primitive Passive Power, and Creaturely Limitation in Leibniz*, «*Studia Leibnitiana*» 42 (2), 2014, pp. 167-189; Id., *Metaphysical Evil Revisited* in S. Newlands, L. Jorgensen (eds.), *New Essays on Leibniz's Theodicy*, Oxford University Press, 2014, pp. 112-134; S. Newlands, *Leibniz on Privations, Limitations, and the Metaphysics of Evil* in «*Journal of the History of Philosophy*» 52 (2), 2014, pp. 281-308.

¹⁴ R. Celada Ballanti, *Erudizione e teodicea. Saggio sulla concezione della storia di G. W. Leibniz*, Liguori Editore, Napoli 2004, p. 492. My translation.

¹⁵ *Theodicy: Essays on the Goodness of God, the Freedom of Man and the Origin of Evil*, §32, Open Court, Chicago 1996, p. 142.

enduring and permanent way (that is, so that they *always* and *continuously* perceive the greatest variety in unity and strive toward the the best, even though only apparent), the original imperfection of monads is expressed through the confusion of perceptions, which constantly changes without ever being entirely annihilated. Given this, I understand perfection as a permanent quality of monads which derives from the divine decree of the best and which can be identified with being governed by it. Nonetheless, since creatures are essentially limited, they always express this quality in an imperfect way. In this sense, the perfection of monads does not truly change. The object of the change is rather its expression. From this perspective, action corresponds to an expression which shows this primitive perfection better, while passion corresponds to an expression which shows the same quality worse. In the first case perceptions are more distinct – that is, more harmonious¹⁶ –; in the second, perceptions are more confused. Thus, to act means to express our internal law better, and to suffer means to express this law worse.

3. Various kinds of monads, various kinds of expression, various kinds of action

It is well known that Leibniz distinguishes three kinds of monads: bare monads or entelechies, souls and spirits. Each of them is characterized by specific powers or faculties and, consequently, by specific degrees of expression. Nevertheless, these types of substances are not strictly separated categories. All monads share the same basic activities (appetition and perception), but in each kind of substance these activities are produced through specific levels of distinction. This implies that what I affirm about the “lowest” degree of monads is true also for the “highest” ones, even though the reverse does not apply. In the specific context of passion, it entails, for example, that what enables passion in a bare monad also enables it in souls and spirits. In the context of action, instead, it implies, for example, that the ways in which entelechies act are also present in souls and spirits, although the action of the latter cannot be reduced to, nor fully identified with, that of the former. Accordingly, what I affirm of bare monads in the following pages should be understood as valid for souls and spirits, and what I will affirm of souls should be regarded as true for spirits as well.

Regarding the two basic activities of substances, I think they can be conceived as expressions of the perfection or internal law of monads. Indeed, each monad represents the greatest variety in unity (that

¹⁶Even though distinction increases with the number of the represented details of an object (see, e.g., *De distincta perceptione*, A VI 4, p. 58; *Discourse of Metaphysics* §24), it is not a purely quantitative matter. If that were the case, there would be no difference between distinct and confused perceptions, since also in the second case the whole universe and all its parts are represented. For a perception to be distinct, therefore, not only details are necessary, but also order. As Paul Rateau argues, the Leibnizian concept of perfection has not a simple quantitative value, but qualitative. See P. Rateau, *Perfection, harmonie et choix divin chez Leibniz: en quell sens le monde est-il le meilleur?*, «Revue de métaphysique et de morale» 70 (2), pp. 181-201.

is, harmony or perfection¹⁷) and strives towards better states. In short, by producing perceptions and appetitions, monads exhibit the actuality of the principle of the best and its continuous efficacy. However, since there are different types of monads, this actuality is variously expressed: bare monads exhibit it in simple perceptions, souls in sensations, spirits in thought¹⁸. All of these forms of representations are in fact multiplicity in unity. Furthermore, given the multiplicity of modes of expression, there will likewise be a plurality of forms of action and passion. More precisely, within a concrete framework, action and passion are not univocal terms: each type of monad acts and “suffers” in its own specific way.

In general, insofar as substances produce distinct perceptions, they are considered active. Therefore, monads capable of multiple levels of distinction can be regarded as active in different modes. For instance, a spirit may be considered active even when its representation consists in simple sensations and when it modifies itself in accordance with these sensations. Nonetheless, in that case, its perception does not reach the highest possible degree: some of its faculties remain latent, as if asleep, and therefore it cannot be considered fully active. In fact, there can be no purely active substance: due to their limitation, their representations are always in part confused. As a result, each monad is always partly active and partly passive. However, the degree of confusion can be diminished through the exercise of one’s faculties. Thus, insofar as a substance exercises its powers, it must be regarded as active. Entelechies are fully active in producing perceptions and appetitions; souls in producing sensations and “passions”; spirits in the exercise of reason, that is, in thought, rational deliberation and, finally, in the love of God, which is inseparable from the knowledge of Him (who is the ultimate reason of things) and from the commitment to the common good¹⁹. In these cases, their representations are as harmonious as possible and the reality of perfection is more perceived and expressed.

¹⁷ To Christian Wolff on 18 May 1715 Leibniz writes as follows: «Perfection is the harmony of things, or the state where everything is worthy of being observed, that is, the state of agreement or identity in variety» (R. Ariew, D. Garber (eds.), *G. W. Leibniz Philosophical Essays*, Hackett Publishing Company, Indianapolis 1989, p. 233-234). For the relation between harmony and perfection, see also A. Dony, *La mesure de la perfection*, «Revue de métaphysique et de morale» 96 (4), 2017, pp. 555-574.

¹⁸ Each kind of representation corresponds to a particular kind of inclination. Simple perception corresponds to imperceptible appetite; sensation corresponds to an inclination whose object is explicitly known, which we may refer to as “passions”; thought corresponds to volition, that is, an inclination in which both the object and the process of its formation are explicitly perceived. Leibniz discusses these kinds of inclination in the *New Essays on Human Understanding*, Book II, Chapter XXI. Since he primarily describes action and passion through the lens of perception, I will not examine the corresponding inclinations in detail. Nevertheless, in order to provide a comprehensive overview of his thought, I consider it important to keep these inclinations in mind as well.

¹⁹ «It follows manifestly that true piety and even true felicity consist in the love of God, but a love so enlightened that its fervour is attended by insight. This kind of love begets that pleasure in good actions which gives relief to virtue, and, relating all to God as to the center, transports the human to the divine. For in doing one's duty, in obeying reason, one carries out the orders of Supreme Reason. One directs all one's intentions to the common good, which is no other than the glory of God. Thus, one finds that there is no greater individual interest than to espouse that of the community, and one gains satisfaction for oneself by taking pleasure in the acquisition of true benefits for men» (*Theodicy*, Preface, cit., pp. 51-52)

On the contrary, passion is the state in which monads do not express the reality of perfection at their best. In this sense, we may even say, for instance, that a spirit “suffers” or is “acted upon” when it does not reflect but instead produces its modifications only in accordance with empirical knowledge and sensation. This may occur, for example, when it is dominated by passions or by confused perceptions that determine its subsequent state. At this point, it becomes clear how states that in a kind of substance are actions, in another one may count as passions: in souls, modifications determined by sensation are actions, whereas in spirits they are mostly passions. Regarding the formers, passion can occur when their faculties are suspended (for example, when they sleep) or when these powers are not enough to attain a state more aligned with their nature. Consider, for example, an animal that is bitten by another one. This state is certainly contrary to soul’s tendency, and yet it occurs; its cause (or more precisely, its condition of possibility) lies in the limits of soul’s faculties and capacities, which prevent it from foreseeing the danger. Regarding bare monads, since they are the kind of substance least capable of distinction, their possibility of passion is also the lowest: indeed, unlike souls and spirits, they can never stop their specific activities, thus entelechies can be regarded as “acted upon” only when their perception is insufficient to produce a successful appetition. In all of these cases, perceptions are more confused and perfection is less perceived.

4. Conditions of action and interaction of monads

Even though Leibniz asserts the metaphysical independence of monad, I think my inquiry would have been incomplete had I not also focused on their interaction. In fact, Leibniz does not deny interaction altogether, but only brute or mechanical transmission of qualities, that is, the fundamental passivity of creatures. Every change of a monad is instead mirrored by the others, and that – he writes in *Discourse of Metaphysics* – makes them, in a certain sense, omnipotent like God²⁰. Thus, as final issue, I examined the relationship between creatural independence and monad’s (intramonadic) connections to all others. The aim of this inquiry was to explore to what extent each monad contributes to the action or passion of another. Indeed, even though substances perceive everything spontaneously – that is, in accordance with their own internal law and without any external contribution –, their representation are for the most part not chosen by them. For instance, the perception that I have of my family and of my hometown follows certainly from my nature or complete notion, but still I have never chosen them. In this sense, to be independent it is not to be absolute, rather it admits certain bonds. In the last part of my research, I attempted to understand how it is possible and which are the effects and implications of it.

²⁰«And since all other substances in their turn express this one in their own way, and adapt themselves to it, it can be said that each extends its power over all the rest in imitation of the omnipotence of the Creator» (*Discourse of Metaphysics*, in L. E. Loemker (eds.), *G. W. Leibniz Philosophical Papers and Letters*, cit., p. 308).

To the first question (how independence admits bonds) we can answer by pointing to the natural activity of substances: they spontaneously produce their predicates and states, which mostly implies relations. In this sense, monads spontaneously produce relations, since they are, indeed, mirrors of the universe.

The second question, instead, is more difficult, and it likely requires still more work than as I have done so far. According to certain lines in Leibniz's writings, we must assert that the action of a monad is reflected by others as passion²¹. Although this correspondence cannot be denied, I think it does not explain the whole story. If that were the case, we would have to affirm that the increase in perfection of a substance "causes" the diminishment of another, or, put differently, that the action of one substance is an obstacle for the action of others. Even though there are cases in which this appears as evident, I think there are situations in which this does not apply. Even more, I think that if an action of a monads hinders the action of another one – namely, the exercise of its faculties – then this reveals a true passion in the former. Two main theoretical reasons led me to this interpretation. The first one – weaker – is Leibniz concept of substance as mirror of the universe. From this idea, it should follow that an increase in perfection of one monad correspond to an increase in perfection of the entire world. I consider this reason the weaker of the two due to its "roughness". Indeed, one might reply me by highlighting the difference between the universe and an individual: what applies to the former, does not necessarily apply to the latter. Furthermore, it risks offering a simplistic and linear view of interaction among substances. Indeed, since each monad is metaphysically independent (i.e., the reason of its change lies in itself), the improvement of one does not directly imply the improvement of the others. Nonetheless, as far as I know, the principle of equivalence is still valid – at least in Leibniz's thought. According to this rule – which is my second theoretical ground – the quantity of reality present in a cause is reproduced in its effect. Applied this principle to our issue, this means that the same quantity of perfection (more precisely, of distinction) present in a monad is mirrored in the others. In this sense, even if only in the form of *petit perception*, every monad should benefit from the improvement of the others. Unfortunately, however, this principle applies also to the case of passion: when someone's expression is worse than its potential, this state is also reflected– even though only as *petit perception* – in the others, making it more difficult for them to produce a more distinct perception.

To sum up, although autonomous, spontaneous and metaphysically independent, monads are always and at the same time conditioned. Neither their actions nor their passions depend therefore entirely

²¹ See, e.g., *Monadology* §52: «It is in this way that actions and passions are mutual among creatures. For God, comparing two simple substances, finds the reasons in each which oblige him to adapt the other to it, with the result that whatever is active in certain respects is passive considered from another point - *active* insofar as what we distinctly know in it serves as a reason for what happens in another, but *passive* insofar as the reason for what happens in it is found in what we know distinctly in another» (in L. E. Loemker, *G. W. Leibniz Philosophical Papers and Letters*, cit., p. 648)

on themselves. Nevertheless, they naturally incline to perfection and always realize what appears to be the best. That is, in their striving toward perfection, they are supported by their own nature or internal principle, which ultimately transcends them. In my view, this provides a solid ground for spirits to turn this natural striving into an apperceived and chosen commitment.

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