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Leibniz on the Illumination of the Agent Intellect

ABSTRACT: How does Leibniz think of the relationship between God and the human intellect? Does he admit some form of divine illumination, or does his account of the intellect leave neither need nor room for any relation beyond the creation and expression shared with non-rational substances? Leibniz's strong opposition to monopsychism and vision-in-God seems to suggest the latter. However, his commitment to the difference between sense and intellect being based on the creature's ability to reflect, affords a more positive answer. Intellects are uniquely illuminated because in participating in divine reflection, they grasp the absoluteness of the divine essence through seeing their perspective as a perspective.

KEYWORDS: Divine Illumination; Agent Intellect; Averroism; Reflection; Perspectivism

1. INTRODUCTION: NO ROOM AND NO NEED FOR ILLUMINATION?

It is an important aim, for those interested in Leibniz's philosophy, to understand his account of the relationship between God and the human intellectual faculty. After all, he is the philosopher who held that "Spirits express God rather than the world, but the other substances express the world rather than God".¹ Yet many issues remain open. One is whether there is a role for *divine illumination* within his account. I will point out some neglected aspects of Leibniz's relationship with the illuminationist tradition, mainly by noting how, in the *Discourse*, it is marked by his aversion to Averroism. I will then propose a way to situate illumination within his mature system.

The proposal is this. Leibniz thinks of illumination not as an extraordinary concurrence of God, but as an expression in some creatures of the divine wisdom which includes even its reflexivity. All substances express God, but some recognise their expressing *as expressing*. They discover that what they see limited in themselves must express something absolute. In attending, even mediately, to those absolute predicates, they become capable of thinking truths – which is precisely intellectuality. God, then, is indeed the light of the spirits in an extraordinary sense. Namely, as the abstracted absolute, required for thinking truths, which reflexive minds take to be what their essence expresses from a limited perspective.

Notions of divine illumination have a rich and complex history, which I cannot explore here. Take just the claim that *intellectual acts require something from God beyond creation*. Does Leibniz want this in his theory, or is his appeal to it a vestige from his forma-

1. A VI, 4, 1584. All English translations are my own.



tive years:² Emblematic of this dilemma is Jolley's claim that "Leibniz preserves the outer shell of the doctrine of divine illumination, but he throws away its philosophical heart".³

There are two ways of thinking about the obstacle in ascribing illumination to Leibniz: that he might have no room for it, and that he might have no need for it. He might have no *room*, if accepting illumination means giving up on the *spontaneity* he grants to all substances. He might have no *need*, because he grants that all substances express God, and thus illumination collapses into creation without "according special status to minds".⁴

My proposal aims to clear both obstacles. Nevertheless, they are serious problems: the *Discourse* gives us cause to consider both. To the first, we find Leibniz retorting, against Malebranche⁵ that "we think immediately through our own ideas, not through those of God".⁶ We are thus left wondering what God needs to do beyond creation: if the ideas are 'our own' then the only sense in which God is our light is that he created us as having them. For the second, he says that "God alone is the immediate object of our perceptions [...]".⁷ But illumination presupposes a distinction between sense and intellect. Instead, here Leibniz appears to be offering a general theory of all perceptual acts. His motives for upholding both obstacles are clear from his engagement with tradition, to which I now turn.

2. SPONTANEITY VERSUS ILLUMINATION

In the claims that risk leaving *no room* for illumination, Leibniz is driven by a core concern: his commitment to the individual existence of created minds *as substances*, and thus *as principles of activity*. Averroist monopsychism and Malebranche's vision in God seem to him – like Spinoza's monism⁸ or Fénelon's quietism⁹ – to deprive the substance of its individuation as an activity. However, to motivate Leibniz's entelechism fully would require more than can be done here, so I will limit myself to some neglected aspects of his engagement with the philosophical tradition. Returning to *Discourse* §28:

God is the sun and the light of souls, [...] After Sacred Scripture and the Fathers, who have always been rather for Plato than for Aristotle, I remember having remarked elsewhere, that since the time of the Scholastics, many have believed that God is the light of the soul and according to their manner of speaking, *the agent intellect of the rational soul*. The Averroists have twisted this in a wicked sense, but some others, among whom I believe that William of S. Amour, Doctor of the

2. Cf. Blank 2019: 161.

3. Jolley 1998: 148.

4. *Ibid.*: 149.

5. *Ibid.*: 146.

6. A VI, 4, 1574.

7. A VI, 4, 1573.

8. A VI, 5, VE 2657.

9. GP VI, 536.

Sorbonne, has found himself, and many mystical theologians have taken it in a manner worthy of God and capable of elevating the soul to the awareness of its good.¹⁰

By alluding to Platonic patristics he means Augustine, the cornerstone of medieval interest in divine illumination.¹¹ The interpretation of Augustine's illuminationism is controversial, but if Leibniz is reducing illumination to God's concurrence which continually "bestows on each creature whatever perfection there is in it",¹² his is hardly a faithful exegesis. Indeed, this sounds like surrender to the obstacle that there is no *need* for illumination.

Crucial to understanding Leibniz's approach to illumination is his comparison of the Augustinian and the Averroist account of the intellect. He comments on the *Confessions* that "[...] there is great resemblance between the agent intellect, be it Aristotle's or Averroes's, when it is corrected (on this see Thomasius's *dissertation*) and this pure intellectual substance of Augustine".¹³ Thomasius's 'correction', however, in aiming to preserve individual immortality,¹⁴ is that there is no "cause for us, because we live and move and have our being in God, to immediately call Him the agent Intellect".¹⁵ Again, therefore, it seems that Leibniz intends to reduce illumination to expressing God, rather than receiving an influence besides creation. The divine light is what is in us by our creation, not by a second divine action, for which there is no room.

The reference to William "of S. Amour" also points in that direction. Leibniz was clearly thinking of someone else – Saint-Amour's *Opera Omnia* (1632) says nothing on these matters. But one of Leibniz's drafts has "of Paris" instead, and a more likely Parisian William is William of *Auvergne*, as also suggested by Rodis-Lewis.¹⁶ But, far from a friend of calling God the "intellectus agens animae rationalis", William of Auvergne's *De Anima* attacks both the distinction between the active and passive intellect, and the positing of an external agent intelligence as necessary for our thinking.¹⁷ Like Thomasius, he took it to be contrary to Christianity, and thus saw no *room* for it.

William does acknowledge *some* things in the mind which cannot have come from the senses, and thus are in some way infused by God.¹⁸ But after infusion no active cooperation of God is required: these truths are 'lights in themselves'.¹⁹ This view is thus closer to positing innate ideas than illumination. There would be no *need* for it: hence Leibniz approves, because here the illumination of the soul is 'spontaneous': once what cannot come from the senses is infused by God, it shines with its own light.

10. A VI, 4, 1573.

11. Noone 2010: 379.

12. A II, 4, 642; GP III, 656.

13. A VI, 4, 1684; cf. e.g. A VI, 1, 510.

14. Radeva 2017: 453; Mercer 2001: 203.

15. Thomasius 1693: 299.

16. Rodis-Lewis 1976: 495. Cf. A VI, 4, 2119, citing OO I, 650.

17. Teske 2000: 33.

18. Marrone 1983: 50.

19. Teske 2000: 443.

3. ILLUMINATION AS REFLECTION ON THE ABSOLUTE

Having outlined the obstacles in this less usual historical perspective, I will exposit a sense in which, though there is no *extraordinary* concurrence, as the Averroists would have it, the expression of God by all creatures acquires an extraordinary function in some of them: *reflection*. This notion, taken in a sense certainly “rather for Plato than for Aristotle”, can rescue Leibniz’s claim to the illuminationist tradition.²⁰

In the *Discourse*, Leibniz gives us an account of the difference between bare or sensible perception and intellect: “the main difference is that they [souls of beasts] do not know what they are, nor what they do, and consequently, since they cannot have reflections, they will not be able to discover truths”.²¹ Rather than infusion, Leibniz here is appropriating the complex tradition of connecting rationality and *reflexivity*.²² But the key is how reflexivity here grounds the ability to *discover truth*. For Leibniz, truth is the inherence of a predicate in a subject,²³ but such predicates express absolute categories:

[...] They [beasts] seemingly are acquainted with whiteness and recognise it in chalk and snow, but that is not yet abstraction, for that requires consideration of the common separated from the particular, and consequently involves acquaintance with universal truths [...].²⁴

Hence, true intellectual acts require something *absolute*. That “true reasoning depends on eternal truths”²⁵ is a well-known Leibnizian thought, and the eternal and the absolute both mean that they involve the divine rather than the creaturely. In the c. 1714 “Monadology” §30 he will explicitly say:

In thinking of ourselves we think of Being, substance, the simple or the composed, the immortal and God himself, *by conceiving that what is limited in us is in him without limit*. And these Reflexive Acts provide the principal objects of our reasonings.²⁶

Upon this, Leibniz founds his famous amendment of the peripatetic maxim, “there is nothing in the intellect that was not in the senses, except the intellect itself”.²⁷ Crucially, however, while the *order of discovery* might be from the limited to the unlimited, the *order of composition* is top-down, and absolute-first, as he sets out clearly in a 1696 draft on the science of the infinite:

[...] the imagination provides occasions to the intellect, but when the intellect then considers for itself the notion put before it, it finds out that what is absolute is so

20. Cf. Rutherford 1998: 27.

21. A VI, 4, 1583.

22. Blank 2009.

23. A VI, 4, 1540.

24. A VI, 6, 142.

25. GP VI, 600.

26. GP VI, 612, my emphasis.

27. A VI, 6, 111.

much prior in the intellect that limited predicates are nothing but modes by which the absolute ones vary, and cannot be understood but through the absolute ones.²⁸

But whatever is *absolute* is just what is eminently contained in the divine essence, as we read in a 1698 letter to Morell: “God is the primitive unity, expressed by all other things according to their capacity [...] varied according to the different combinations of unity with zero”.²⁹ Therefore we can speak of a sense in which God is a special light for the rational souls, because while the merely perceiving substances never encounter anything except the limited versions, the intellect, as far as it deals with absolute predicates, is looking at God. If Jolley’s challenge to the illumination claim was that there’s no discerning between the brute and the spiritual perception of God, then this construal seems to dispel it.

4. PERSPECTIVAL ASCENT TO THE ABSOLUTE

But *how* does the reflexive act grant absolute perspective? An infused vision of God, to which Leibniz is opposed, would have been an easy solution. The hurdle with the reflection answer is that the individual creature has an essence which is constituted by *limited* instances of the divine attributes. How does immediate perceptual access to our limited essence grant us any more power to “conceive unlimited in God what we see limited in us” than access to sensibilia?

Leibniz finds the solution in *the realisation of the perspectivity of our experience*. Reflection allows us to see our perspective *as a perspective*. If we do, we commence a process of abstraction towards the absolute, and thereby gain a distinct perspective, that of the intellect:

Indeed we cannot see such an order, while we do not stand in the right point of view (*Gesichtspunkt*) [...] We alone must place ourselves with the eyes of the intellect where we do not see and cannot see with the eyes of the body.³⁰

Brutes, instead, cannot see that their perceptions are perspectival. It is really this perspective which allows the apprehending, even if not the contemplation, of absolute predicates. Again Platonically, Leibniz takes the mark of the intellect to consist in distinguishing reality and appearance.³¹ In light of the reflection account this becomes precise: by seeing appearance as appearance, we become aware of there being something underneath. Leibniz offers a powerful analogy to illustrate this distinction in the *Discourse* §35, where he claims that “the difference is as great as that between the mirror and the one who sees”.³²

This self-perception is not itself an absolute perspective, but what allows an ascent towards it. In a 1712 draft for a letter to Des Bosses, Leibniz outlines the difference

28. LH 35, 7, 10 Bl. 5r.

29. A I, 15, 650. Compare Antognazza 2015: 15.

30. DS 51.

31. GP VI, 502.

32. A VI, 4, 1585.

between the divine and the creaturely perspective: “among bodies, their appearance for us and for God is somewhat like that between scenography [perspective projection] and ichnography [parallel projection]”.³³ We are cut off from *experiencing* ichnography, but refer to it in reasoning by recognising scenographies as derivative from it. Leibniz’s appropriation of Augustinian illumination might thus seem less heterodox: the same light shines in all substances, *but* only those capable of reflection *see* the light within themselves, and thus by *seeing* rather than just *having* the light within, they see God.

The objection now might be that though the reflective realisation of our limitedness might alert us to the fact that there is an absolute perspective beyond ours, it does not automatically grant us an ability to progress towards it. Leibniz’s solution would be that the ascent towards the absolute involves comparison of multiple perspectives upon it. A highly allegorical text from ca. 1693, known as *Philosophical Dream*, suggests just that:

A venerable old man [...] told me that this Light was what, back here, is called prudence and reason. [...] I often changed in posture to consider different holes of the vault which provided this small light, and when I placed myself in a spot where one could at once be aware (*apperçûes*) of multiple lights from their truthful point of view, I found an assemblage of rays which enlightened me very much.³⁴

A crucial point is that Leibniz does not take the *completion* of the ascent to be necessary, or even possible, to already use absolute predicates. Leibniz regards even an incomplete perception of the absolute to have already shifted its object from the world to God, because it is sufficient to ground our use of ‘blind’ cognitions³⁵ by which our ‘scenographic’ experience is repurposed into *échantillons architectoniques*³⁶ of the absolute perspective.

5. CONCLUSION: REFLEXIVITY AS PARTICIPATION

There is another aspect of his notion of reflexivity by which Leibniz approaches illumination. Since *all* creaturely properties are only limitations upon the divine ones, also the reflexive faculty will just be another limitation of a divine property. In Leibniz’s sense of Platonic participation, all perceiving is an emanation into creatures of a possible limited version of the divine wisdom.³⁷ Whether a perception is reflective or not can be thought of as depending on how that attribute is limited in its bearer.

The notion that God engages in a reflexive act has a long history. For Leibniz, it is that reflection that generates the contents of the divine intellect and thereby is at the root of the possible worlds presupposed by creation.³⁸ It is one of the highest aspects of the divine act, thus it is fitting that Leibniz should take participation in it to elevate

33. GP II, 438.

34. LH 4, 8, Bl. 53r.

35. A VI, 6, 264.

36. GP VI, 621.

37. GP VI, 615.

38. E.g. Grua 326.

souls into communion with God. If we ask in what transcreation³⁹ – i.e. God making a sensitive soul rational – would consist, we would explain it in terms of a change in the privations applied to the pure positivity constituting the essence of the creature: as a lifting of the privation of reflexivity. Be it the result of a qualitative or, if we take Leibniz's principle of continuity very strictly, of a quantitative difference in participation in divine wisdom, *reflexivity in act* is a criterion which only some substances meet, and these are in a sense extraordinarily enlightened.

Participation in the divine reflexive act is to be admitted in the sense that, like all other properties, creaturely reflections are an emanation from the divine essence. Nevertheless, in line with the aversion to monopsychism, we cannot say that the creature's reflection participates in the divine in the sense that there is a single universal reflexive act in multiple substances. Even the "conversation"⁴⁰ with God of spirits seems to be best explained as pre-established stages of the development of the law of the substance, conserved in existence by the divine emanation without need for *extraordinary* concurrence.

I think this helps clarify some aspects of Leibniz's thoughts on the God-intellect relationship. Firstly, it notes that his historical engagements suggest that a core desideratum is that divine illumination must leave no slippery slope to monopsychism. Secondly, it notes that he can rescue the 'extraordinary' flavour of illumination without positing an extraordinary concurrence from God. He finds it in the unique position in which replicating the divine reflexive act puts limited creatures. In fact, he finds *need* for it, in the requirement that reason move from the limited to the absolute, and he finds *room* for it, in the possibility that the reflexive act participates in God's reflection. In this light, it is not only because everything positive in creatures expresses God in a limited way that God is our light. Instead, it is also by the grasp of the absolute behind that limited expression, even though full contemplation of it lies at the end of an endless Platonic ascent.

ABBREVIATIONS

A = G. W. Leibniz, *Sämtliche Schriften und Briefe*, Darmstadt & Leipzig & Berlin, Akademie Verlag, 1923- (Volume VI, 5 in preprint = VE).

DS = G. W. Leibniz, *Deutsche Schriften*, hrsg. von G. E. Guhrauer, 2 vols., Berlin, Veit und Comp., 1840.

GP = *Die philosophischen Schriften von Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz*, hrsg. von C. I. Gerhardt, 7 vols., Berlin, Weidmann, 1875-1890; repr. Hildesheim, Georg Olms, 1978.

Grua = G. W. Leibniz, *Textes inédits d'après les manuscrits de la Bib. Provinciale de Hanovre*, éd. par G. Grua, 2 vols., Paris, PUF, 1948.

LH = *Die Leibniz-Handschriften der Königl. öffentl. Bibliothek zu Hannover*, Mit Ergänzungen und Register von G. Krönert und H. Lackmann, sowie einem Vorwort von K.-H. Weimann, Hannover, Leibniz-Archiv, 1966.

OO = B. Le Feron, *Guilielmi Alverni Opera Omnia*, Paris, Hotot, 1674.

39. GP VI, 153.

40. A VI, 4, 1585.

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