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LOCKE AND LEIBNIZ ON PERCEPTION*

The publication of Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz's *Nouveaux essais* (written 1703–1704, published 1765), which are entirely dedicated to the analysis of the content of John Locke's *An Essay concerning Human Understanding* (1690), gives researchers a rare opportunity to study the differences in both philosophers' views. It is not surprising that the polemics of these two creators of such diverse philosophical conceptions have been the cause for numerous historical and philosophical analyses: Leibniz's philosophy crowned 17th century metaphysics along with its major category of substance, Locke's concept heralded modern British empiricism which shortly afterwards in David Hume's works was to lead to the sceptical negation of traditional metaphysics. Naturally, researchers' attention has been most often drawn to these issues, which are equally fundamental for both thinkers: namely the relationship between reason and religious beliefs, the understanding of substance, the conception of nature or the problem of personal identity, because they best reveal the differences in views taken by those philosophers.¹

In this article, I have addressed a different issue, namely Leibniz's criticism of Locke's understanding of perception. In my judgement, the criticism is the result of a quite superficial understanding of *An Essay concerning Human Understanding*, and additionally comes more from various general philo-

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¹ Brandon C. LOOK, *Leibniz and Locke on Natural Kinds*, pdf online, accessed 30.03.2017, <https://www.uky.edu/~look/Leibniz&Locke.pdf>; Ben Lazar MIJUSKOVIC, "Locke and Leibniz on Personal Identity," *The Southern Journal of Philosophy* 13 (1975), 2: 205–214, Paul LODGE and Benjamin CROWE, "Leibniz, Bayle, and Locke on Faith and Reason," *American Catholic Philosophical Quarterly* 76 (2002), 4: 575–600.

sophical grounds than actually different views on the process of perception itself. The cause of this misunderstanding may be the one-sided understanding of Locke's thesis in which he advances that the whole content of thinking is the object of consciousness, along with the belief about the entirely acquired nature of human knowledge.² Emphasizing the dissimilarity between his stand and Locke's views, Leibniz claims that the process of perception does not merely apply to the content that we are aware of, but also to the content which is *implicite*. At the same time, he highlights Locke's statement that even though perception constitutes the most basic operation of the mind, it is at the same time one of the reflective ideas, namely the object of thought in human consciousness. However, Locke's declaration that "Every man being conscious to himself that he thinks, and that which his mind is applied about, whilst thinking, being the ideas that are there" (E, II,1,1, p. 77) does not necessarily mean that all the processes taking place in the mind are conscious operations.

His recognition that the process called perception occurs even beyond the gate of consciousness allows Leibniz not only to claim that knowledge is innate, but also to state that the essence of the substance, such as a human soul, is activity.³ According to Leibniz, Locke attributed passivity to the

² This statement needs a clarification, which goes beyond the scope of this paper. It should be noted, however, that Locke opposes the innate character of *impressions* and *principles* (E, I,1,1–2, p. 13–14), which denies the possibility of divine revelation and establishes the grounds for three levels of his investigations: the history of human understanding—the analysis breaking up mental content into simple elements (which is of a psychological character) for experimental sciences, and the source of all ideas, being the activity of external bodies acting mechanically on our sense organs, as well as the activity of the human mind. An attack on the notion of innatism with reference to natural law and religion can be found as early as his *Questions concerning the Law of Nature* from the mid-1660s. See John LOCKE, "Is the Law of Nature inscribed in the minds of Men? It is not," in IDEM, *Questions concerning the Law of Nature*, ed. and trans. Robert Horwitz, Jenny Strauss Clay, and Diskin Clay (Ithaca–London: Cornell University Press, 1990), 139–152. Quotations from the two main source texts according to the following editions: Gottfried Wilhelm LEIBNIZ, *New Essays Concerning Human Understanding*, trans. Alfred Gideon Langley (London: MacMillan Company, 1896 — abbr. NE, I give the numbers of the book, the chapter and the page); Gottfried Wilhelm LEIBNIZ, *Monadology*, trans. Robert Latta, revised by Donald Rutherford, accessed 30 March 2017, <http://philosophyfaculty.ucsd.edu/faculty/rutherford/Leibniz/translations/Monadology.pdf> — abbr. M, I give the number of the paragraph; John LOCKE, *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding*, in: IDEM, *The Works of John Locke*, vol. 1–2 (London: Rivington 1824 — abbr. E, I give the numbers of the book, the chapter, the paragraph, and the page; the first book of the *Essay* and the first six chapters of the second book are contained in the first volume of the edition).

³ See Anne-Lise REY, "Perception and Individuality in Leibnizian Conception of Substance," in *Locke and Leibniz on Substance*, edited by Paul Lodge and Tom Stoneham (New York: Routledge, 2015), 165 ff.

mind, at least when it comes to the simple elements of experience, that is simple ideas. Binding perception with activity, Leibniz considers perception as the factor differentiating individual substances; while Locke's *new way of ideas*, emphasizing the psychological and social aspects of experience, abandons the metaphysics of substance to some extent: the identity of a thing is built in his opinion in a completely different way, dissimilar for objects of inanimate nature, living creatures and humans. His pessimism concerning the possibility of identifying the essence of a substance was accompanied by the isolation of the psychological plane of investigation and its independence from metaphysics, especially in its idealistic form. However, as we will see, despite all the differences mentioned, the psychological description of the process of perception presented by both philosophers is, contrary to Leibniz's declarations, surprisingly parallel.

THE APPLE OF DISCORD: PERCEPTION AS AN OBJECT OF EXPERIENCE

Let us begin with presenting three main points of Leibniz's criticism. *Firstly*, according to Leibniz, all perceptions, as well as all mental processes in general, as described by Locke, would be the objects of consciousness, while in reality "there are at every moment an infinite number of *perceptions* in us, but without apperception and reflection, i.e. changes in the soul itself of which we are not conscious, because the impressions are either too slight and too great in number, or too even, so they have nothing sufficiently distinguishing them from each other" (NE, *Introduction*, p. 47). In other words, it is not correct for Leibniz to compare the mind to white paper being written upon by experience, as Locke does, and to state that everything that appears in it is immediately detectable by our consciousness.

The second reservation relates to the presumed passivity of the mind during perception. While, according to Locke, the activity of the mind allows constructing complex ideas, perception of simple elements of experience is reduced to bare receptivity. Leibniz's *Philalethes* summarises the concept as follows "in what we call *perception* the mind is ordinarily purely passive, not being able to avoid perceiving what it actually perceives" (NE, 2,9, p. 135). *Philalethes* also makes a reference to the fact that the passivity of the mind means the lack of voluntary attention; however, Leibniz himself understands the activity as the essence of the substance itself, and the result

of this activity is the change in the state of the substance called perception. Therefore, in *Monadology*, we read that “the natural changes of monads come from an internal principle, since an external cause cannot influence it internally [...] The passing state that involves and represents a multitude in the unity, or in the simple substance, is nothing but what is called perception, which is to be distinguished from apperception or consciousness” (M, 11,14). Leibniz expresses this claim even more clearly in a short passage in the work *On the system of occasional causes* (1689/90): “Each substance is the true and real cause of its own immanent actions, and has the power of acting, and although it is merely passive, and this is true both in the case of corporeal substances and incorporeal ones.”⁴ He also reiterates the opinion in *Nouveaux essais* stating that “a substance cannot exist without an action, and that there is indeed never a body without movement” (NE, *Introduction*, p. 47). Thus, because perceptions are distinct from apperceptions, it is admissible or even necessary to attribute them to every substance, not only to human beings and animals, but also to plants.

Therefore, *the third* objection concerns Locke’s limited understanding of perception—it is a terminological objection (it concerns the scope of the concept of perception), as well as the one connected with a different understanding of substance and the role of metaphysics in human cognition (for Leibniz the relationship between perception and the activity of non-corporeal substances). This dispute is the result of Locke’s choosing the *new way of ideas*, viz. the analysis of mental operations made in an almost complete isolation from the tenets of metaphysics.

In fact, Locke does not deny the existence of a substance, material or spiritual, but such statements have no practical significance, or, at least, no significance for his philosophical programme. As the architectonics of his *Essay* reveals, that the aim of Locke’s endeavour is establishing the objective knowledge on private experience of individual people, which is only possible through language communication. Thus two issues should be differentiated (if not separated): the supposed existence of active, spiritual substance, and undeniable fact of experience liable to description and mediation by language. Thus, basing on the definition of the substance, we can ascribe changeability to it, whereas the term ‘perception’, quite unlike Leibniz, Locke reserves for the conscious act of thinking through which an experienced content is apprehended.

⁴ Gottfried Wilhelm LEIBNIZ, *The Shorter Leibniz Texts*, trans. Lloyd Strickland (London, New York: Continuum, 2006), 68.

As I will try to demonstrate, the first of Leibniz's objections is unjustified, because a careful reading of *An Essay concerning Human Understanding* does not lead us to the conclusion that all perceptions of the human mind must be the object of consciousness. Nevertheless, the second and third objections are justified, but only to some extent, and happen due to the confusion of the two orders, namely the psychological description of the conditions of knowledge and its metaphysical justification. In order to support this view, let us refer to the main assumptions that Locke makes, since they are the ones that condition the understanding of perception which draws so much of Locke's criticism.

LOCKE AND HIS 'NEW WAY OF IDEAS'

The comment made by Locke at the beginning of the *Essay* places the research conducted in this work primarily on the mental plane. "I shall not at present meddle with the physical consideration of the mind—we read there—or trouble myself to examine, wherein its essence consists, or by what motions of our spirits, or alterations of our bodies, we come to have any sensation by our organs, or any ideas in our understandings; and whether those ideas do in their formation, any, or all of them, depend on matter or no" (E, I,1,2, p. 3). At the starting point of the analyses conducted by Locke, judgements concerning the existence of bodies, the laws governing their motion and the existence of substance become suspended because the task of the *new way of ideas* is to provide the basis for determining what exists. The novelty of this method, however, consists not so much in the limitation of research to the objects of thought—it is ultimately meant to allow for the formulation of existential judgements—as it aims towards reconciling the particularity of one's experience with the objectivity and certainty of knowledge.⁵ For this purpose, Locke reconstructs the way empirical concepts are constructed from the material of experience (simple ideas of sense and of reflection), and with the use of language—judgements are formulated which can determine what really exists: natural bodies, other persons, God, as well as mathematical and moral propositions. This intention requires—as Locke

⁵ Another characteristic feature of Locke's approach is stressing various shortcomings of human mental powers—from this point of view the *Essay* describes not only human understanding (in a general sense), but also various mental deficiencies of individual people (see e.g. E, II,11, pp. 134–143).

says—not only to treat the sensual content of experience as belonging to thinking itself (rather than to things), but also to objectify the operation of the mind itself. “The understanding, says Locke, like the eye, whilst it makes us see and perceive all other things, takes no notice of itself; and it requires art and pains to set it at a distance, and make it its own object” (E, I,I,1, p. 1). Thus, “seeing human understanding at a distance” requires a two-step procedure—indication that the direct objects of experience are perceptions, and not the things themselves (by separation of the ideas of sense) and objectification of the mental processes themselves (depicted as reflective ideas). This way, the eye of reason can turn to itself and by following the “historical, plain method” give an account “of the ways, whereby our understanding come to attain those notions of things we have” (ibid.).

The method is therefore “historical” in the sense that history was comprehended in the 17th-century studies of nature—as the accumulation of observations and results of experiments—except that, as opposed to them, the research objects are not natural phenomena (as for instance Robert Boyle’s *History of Cold* or *History of Human Blood*)⁶ but objects of the human mind. On the other hand, the construction of concepts composed of simple ideas and the claim that the latter constitutes the construction material of all concepts mean a kind of reconstruction. The statement that experience consists of simple elements (simple ideas of sense, such as the idea of a red colour or the scent of clover), requires that these elements be extracted through a series of mind operations: in this case, one has to extract its certain element, compare it with others, give it a name, etc. and experience is not a composition of simple elements, from which the human mind compiles complex ideas. These reconstruction procedures allow us not only to imagine how the experience of infants and young children can develop,⁷ but also to create a model of experience, the analysis of which leads to its simplest components.

⁶ The early modern revival of the concept of natural history can be traced back to the publication of Francis Bacon’s *Sylva Sylvarum* (1627). It is noteworthy that the long history of Locke’s *Essay*, the first draft of which was written about twenty years before its publication, was preceded by his scientific investigations: the collaboration with Boyle and his circle, his medical interests and engagement in the works of the Royal Society of London. On the collaboration of Locke and Boyle see Kenneth DEWHURST, “Locke’s Contribution to Boyle’s Researches on the Air and on Human Blood,” *Notes and Records of the Royal Society of London* 17 (1962): 198–206; and on the collaboration of Locke with the Royal Society: Adam GRZELIŃSKI, “John Locke and the Royal Society of London,” in *Znaczenie filozofii Oświecenia. Człowiek wśród ludzi*, ed. Barbara Grabowska, Adam Grzeliński, and Jolanta Żelazna (Toruń: Wydawnictwo Naukowe UMK, 2016), 255–278.

⁷ See for example: “And he that will consider, that infants, newly come into the world, spend the greatest part of their time in sleep, and are seldom awake, but when either hunger calls for the

This reconstructive character of the history of human understanding is also revealed by the fact that the description of reflexivity—human thinking that has been subjected to objectification—may, on the one hand, consist in pointing out particular operations of the human mind (in this sense we may speak of “perception, thinking, doubting, believing, reasoning, knowing, willing, and *all the different actings of our own minds* [E, II,1,4, p. 78, emphasis mine]). On the other hand, it is about pointing to the basic operations that make up general thinking and which constitute the next steps on the way to the formation of empirical concepts. The latter operation encompasses the following activities: perception, retention, memory, discernment, judgement, comparing, compounding, naming and abstraction, which create “a short, and ...true history of the first beginnings of human knowledge, whence the mind has its first objects” (E, II,11,14, p. 141). Thus, what is the specificity of perception understood as “the first and simplest idea we have from reflection” (E, II,9,1, p. 121)? As we have seen, the isolation of simple ideas of sense (“red” or “clover smell”) requires all of the above-mentioned mind operations: besides associating the name, also the extraction of a certain aspect of experience (the colour and scent, however not the shape); this, on the other hand, is only possible when several fragments of experience in which a similarity is noted are compared (a similar scent or colour). The condition for making the comparison is, in turn, keeping in mind and recalling past experiences, and lastly—a retention guaranteeing the continuity of experience in subsequent moments. Such a reconstruction of experience allows one to go back to the most original aspect of experience—perception. An isolated and, in a sense, “pure” perception would mean only a certain state of mind that would be stimulated *in any way*—thus, it would mean merely noticing a change in relation to the previous experience. Since at the earliest stage of the development of experience, there is no way of combining particular fragments of experience into empirical concepts or even preserving the previous content (this possibility only arises because of retention and memory), it is legitimate to say that perception alone merely implies the awareness of

teat, or some pain, (the most importunate of all sensations) or some other violent impression upon the body forces the mind to perceive, and attend to it: he, I say, who considers this, will, perhaps, find reason to imagine, that a fetus in the mother’s womb differs not much from the state of a vegetable; but passes the greatest part of its time without perception or thought, doing very little in a place where it needs not seek for food, and is surrounded with liquor, always equally soft, and near of the same temper; where the eyes have no light, and the ears, so shut up, are not very susceptible of sounds; and where there is little or no variety, or change of objects to move the senses” (E, II,1,21, pp. 90–91).

a change in the entirety of experience conceived as a certain undifferentiated “field” rather than a collection of its isolated elements.

LEIBNIZ’S CRITIQUE

Another issue concerns Locke’s understanding of the activity and passivity of the mind. Leibniz’s criticism is justified only in part in this respect. Although Locke writes about a passive reception of simple ideas, he still understands the concept of activity differently than Leibniz. Referring to the perception of simple ideas, Locke comments: “In this part the understanding is merely passive; and whether or no it will have these beginnings, and as it were materials of knowledge, is not in its own power. For the objects of our senses do, many of them, obtrude their particular ideas upon our minds whether we will or no; and the operations of our minds will not let us be without, at least, some obscure notions of them. No man can be wholly ignorant of what he does when he thinks. These simple ideas, when offered to the mind, the understanding can no more refuse to have, nor alter, when they are imprinted, nor blot them out, and make new ones itself, than a mirror can refuse, alter, or obliterate the images or ideas which the objects set before it do therein produce” (E, II,1,25, pp. 140–141). Hence, the activity, as understood by Locke, is tantamount to deliberately focusing one’s attention on a certain aspect or part of experience, whereas for Leibniz, activity is also the essence of substance. In the light of the analysis of personal identity in the *Essay* (especially E, II,27,12), it is legitimate to say that Leibniz’s claim would be a kind of unjustified metaphysics going beyond any possible experience.

It is now worth mentioning three points: first, the description of experience, understood as the entirety of the objects of thought, is not only limited to the objects of consciousness. Locke’s repeated use of the comparison of experience to the “visual field” on this occasion indicates that some objects may be removed beyond it (when they are lost in the darkness of oblivion), or remain at its periphery—when a lack of attention will cause them not to be properly distinguished and compared to others, remaining in the “indistinct” part of experience. Second, along with the act of distinguishing the individual components of experience, its objectification occurs—they become objectively more distinct, and the operations on them are to a certain degree dependent on the will, as a result of which experience may be shaped to some extent by concentrating attention on its fragment, wishing to recall

what was once the subject of experience, or arbitrarily combining simple ideas and creating general concepts. Hence, the various varieties of thinking come from a completely dispersed state of a dream or fantasy, by concentrating attention up to the state “when the mind with great earnestness, and of choice, fixes its view on any idea, considers it on all sides, and will not be called off by the ordinary solicitation of other ideas,” which can be referred to as “an intention or study” (E, II,19,1, p. 213). Only perception is independent of volitional activity, allowing only to see that there is in fact a change in experience—its further “processing” becomes more and more dependent on the will—up to the arbitrary naming and creating of general concepts.

The mind, as Locke puts it, is not “a looking-glass, which constantly receives variety of images, or ideas, but retains none; they disappear and vanish, and there remain no footsteps of them” (E, II,1,15, p. 131). Even in such a simple experience, one can point to the rudimentary activity of the mind, i.e. the variability of its field of experiences, as well as the possibility of reflecting upon it, which is the condition for the isolation of the reflective idea of perception. Passivity means only a lack of volitional activity boiled down to focusing attention and operations on ideas. Simple ideas are only perceived and set the limits of the activity of the mind. If the activity involves the creation of ideas, Locke must recognise that it is equivalent to the structuring of the originally undifferentiated experience by directing the attention to its individual fragments. Only in this sense may the perception of simple ideas be considered passive—however, it rather demarcates the limits of various operations than the state of total passivity. Neither does it mean that all—also the simplest—elements of experience are the subject of a conscious experience.

And this is the subject of Leibniz’s third objection: according to him, perceptions that are objects for consciousness constitute only a certain class of observation. “And to judge still better of the minute perceptions which we cannot distinguish in the crowd, I am wont to make use of the example of the roar or noise of the sea which strikes one when on its shore. To understand this noise as it is made, it would be necessary to hear the parts which compose the whole, i.e. the noise of each wave, although each of these little noises makes itself known only in the confused collection of all the others, i.e. in the roar itself, and would not be noticed if the wave which makes it were alone” (NE, *Introduction*, p. 48). Leibniz’s allegation, however, is based on the premise that, according to Locke, all ideas in the human mind are conscious, and since the actions of the mind are given as ideas, ulti-

mately nothing happens in the mind of which we would not be aware. An initial *tabula rasa* is only filled over time with the objects of thinking delivered through the senses and reflection; the mind becomes illuminated, which reveals everything hidden in it and what is happening in it.

To some extent, such an interpretation is justified and supported by the text. When confronted with the innate speculative rules, Locke writes, for instance, “To say a notion is imprinted on the mind, and yet at the same time to say, that the mind is ignorant of it, and never yet took notice of it, is to make this impression nothing. No proposition can be said to be in the mind, which it never yet knew, which it was never yet conscious of” (E, I,2,5, p. 15). On the other hand, in book two of the *Essay*, he opposes the Cartesian thesis proclaiming that the soul thinks constantly by adding: “I do not say there is no soul in a man, because he is not sensible of it in his sleep: but I do say, he cannot think at any time waking or sleeping, without being sensible of it. Our being sensible of it is not necessary to anything, but to our thoughts; and to them it is, and to them it will always be necessary, till we can think without being conscious of it” (E, II,1,10, p. 82). According to Leibniz, the Cartesian error is that it assumes that all thinking processes are conscious, leading to the recognition that thinking is only vested in people and that the whole of nature is regarded as a soulless mechanism (M, 14). On the other hand, Locke is also mistaken, claiming that during sleep we do not experience any, even the weakest impressions (NE, *Introduction*, p. 25). The notion of a substance whose activity is the source of perception (cf. M, 15), can be reconciled with experience when we assume that perceptions may differ in their degree of strength and distinctness, and that “there are at every moment an infinite number of perceptions in us, but without apperceptions and reflection, i.e. changes in the soul itself of which we are not conscious, because the impressions are either too slight and too great in number, or too even, so they have nothing sufficiently distinguishing them from each other” (NE, *Introduction*, p. 47). Hence, according to Leibniz, the mistake in Locke’s claim is that “it is being hard to conceive, that anything should think, and not be conscious of it” (E, II,1,11, p. 83): consciousness of the changes occurring in the mind is like the tip of the iceberg which dominates over the entirety of the mental processes. This claim, that below such conscious content nothing else exists in the mind, makes it appear that such processes appear out of nowhere. According to Leibniz, the realised perceptions, as if the tip of the iceberg were completely deprived of its solid base, would have to drift in the emptiness.

Leibniz's criticism in this regard is correct, provided that Locke actually reduces all mental activity to the realised content. However this is not the case. For when Locke introduces the concept of reflective ideas which are to refer to the "operations of our own mind" (E, II,1,4, p. 79), he adds: "The term operations here I use in a large sense, as comprehending not barely the actions of the mind about its ideas, but some sort of passions arising sometimes from them, such as is the satisfaction or uneasiness arising from any thought" (ibidem). The process of perception begins with noticing a change within—as we have called it—the field of experience, however the "large sense" of the term "operations" does not preclude the existence of mental processes occurring "in the depths" of the mind, of which we may only see the surface whose variability constitutes the object of perception. Unlike Leibniz, Locke narrows the meaning of the term "perception" to the conscious grasping of objects (ideas) and states that the source of these objects are "external material things, as the objects of sensation; and the operations of our own minds within, as the objects of reflection" (E, II,1,4, p. 78). And since neither our soul, nor material things are directly given to experience—at most one can make a hypothesis regarding their real essence;⁸ in an analogous way, the emergence of perceptible content of experience in the experience itself is given as the end result. However, Leibniz and Locke's psychological analyses of the process of perception are not fundamentally different. "The passing state that involves and represents a multitude in the unity, or in the simple substance, is nothing but what is called perception, which is to be distinguished from apperception or consciousness"—Leibniz says in the *Monadology* (M, 14), and Locke would have definitely agreed with it.

Perception thus understood should be differentiated from apperception, being the awareness of the subjectivity of one's own perception. "We might perhaps add that the animals have perception, and that it is not necessary that they have thought, that is to say, that they have reflection or what may be its object" (NE, IX, p. 135). Also Locke would describe consciousness as the awareness of perceiving. Thus, the ability to perceive can be attributed to both other people and to animals, since it can be deduced from their adjustment of behavior to outer circumstances, but being conscious of one's own inner mental states is only a human ability. The "emergence of consciousness" within the field of experience refers to a twofold process of its differ-

⁸ On the hypothetical character of the speculations concerning the real essences of bodies in Locke's philosophy, see e.g. Peter ANSTEY, *John Locke and Natural Philosophy* (Oxford, New York: Oxford University Press, 2011), 70 ff.

entiation, since experience itself in its pure form, only reduced to perception, is a “field” in which no more than a dynamic character can be recognised. The first stage of the process refers to the consciousness of the ideas of sense and can be characterised by two aspects of experience, subjective and objective—even if the consciousness of subjectivity is vague: “Consciousness is the perception of what passes in a man’s own mind. Can another man perceive that I am conscious of any thing, when I perceive it not myself?” (E, II,1,19, p. 89). The second stage of the differentiation of experience is the objectification of the very mental operations by reflection: thinking, supposed to be the essence of the soul, turns out to be a collection of objects—ideas of reflection. In a similar way, Leibniz distinguishes between perceptions and “apperceptions or consciousness.”

PERCEPTION AND TWO MODELS OF KNOWLEDGE

The above interpretation of Locke’s understanding of experience, permitting the existence of mental operations that are not yet realised (which corresponds to the Leibnizian notion of “minute perceptions”), together with his limitation of the use of the term “perception” only to experience, results from the idea of knowledge he proclaimed, however different from that of Leibniz.

The main topic of the *Essay concerning Human Understanding* is, as we read in the *Introduction*, “to shew what knowledge the understanding hath by ideas; and the certainty, evidence, and extent of it” (E, I,1,3, p. 2). Defining the scope of certain knowledge and distinguishing it from faith and opinion is possible through an analysis of experience and an indication on its basis of the possibility of constructing concepts and judgements that use them. In other words, the new way of ideas allows one to move from a private, individual experience to common knowledge, though it will be experience based. The fact that the mind deals only with its own ideas and knowledge does not prevent the mind from going beyond the said individualism. The description of experience, and in particular the above analysis of reflectivity, allows presenting the formation of empirical concepts by structuring the originally undifferentiated experience. Only operations on the objects of the mind are referred to by Locke as thinking. And only when, by analysis, we isolate simple mental operations, can we talk about perception.

Thus, to some extent, the dispute between the two philosophers on the

character of perception, and specifically on the existence of minute perceptions that are not subject to consciousness, is terminological in nature. Although Leibniz is well aware that the concept of the mind as a *tabula rasa*, which is at the beginning void of any characters but later is written upon by experience and perfectly visible in the light of human understanding, is a precondition for the success of Locke's undertaking, he extends this claim over Locke's entire philosophical programme. Whereas it constitutes the founding of Locke's theory of cognition, its significance is limited to the function it fulfils. If it were to be the grounding of the whole philosophical system, philosophy would have to be reduced to his new way of ideas. Meanwhile, the reconstruction of the formation of empirical concepts, designed to indicate their comprehensibility, constitutes only a starting point for describing the functioning of language and defining the limits of human knowledge.

Thus, the essence of Leibniz's allegations in relation to the understanding of perception by the English philosopher does not concern the process of perception and of human reflectivity, themselves understood by the two philosophers in essentially the same way. To both, perception implies the inclusion of any change within the content being experienced. Locke would have probably agreed with Leibniz's comment: "For all attention requires memory, and often when we are not admonished, do to speak, and warned to take note of some of our own present perceptions, we allow them to pass without reflection, and even without being noticed; but if anyone directs our attention to them immediately after, and makes us notice, for example, some noise which was just heard, we remember it, and are conscious of having had at the time some feeling of it" (NE, pp. 47–48). In fact, the dispute concerns the task fulfilled in both cases by the description of perception as well as the relationship between cognition and metaphysics.

If the new way of ideas, which is an explanation for the possibility of success of the 17th-century cognition of nature, constituted the whole of Locke's philosophical programme, it would also mean that the description of mental operations was largely psychological: the only object of description would be the content of conscious thinking, and Locke's settlements would be close to Hume's phenomenalism and scepticism, completely abandoning the metaphysical claims regarding the existence of matter, the soul or God. However, this is not the case, and cognition, or at least the knowledge of nature, according to Locke, concerns both natural history and philosophical speculations. Nevertheless, because the main stress is placed on the cumula-

tive knowledge of facts—the results of observations and experiments—speculations regarding the structure of matter (the real essence of bodies) are hypothetical and justified insofar as they are helpful in research—the planning of new experiments or pointing at possible correlations of the results of observation. For the naturalists of the second half of the seventeenth century, such a convenient way of explication of phenomena was the corpuscular hypothesis, according to which the real essences of bodies were reduced to the *primary qualities* of the bodies (impenetrability, geometric features, and mechanical causality).⁹ However, Locke was aware that the relationship between the secondary qualitative qualities of bodies and the primary quantitative qualities could not be explained either by either the philosophy of nature or natural history. Clarification of this relationship requires making a reference to metaphysics. Although it is required to take into account the fact that alongside the advancement of experimental science we will come closer and closer to knowing the essences of bodies, this will only imply a progress in the technical observational capabilities and an increasingly detailed geometric model of nature. But what is the basis of the relationship between the two types of bodily characteristics? What makes certain bodies, whose essential features are of a quantitative nature, produce such and not other qualitative experiences? Answers to these questions will not be provided by natural philosophy or, all the more, by natural history, and experience can at most confirm the suitability of both orders. “It being no more impossible—says Locke—to conceive that God should annex such ideas to such motions, with which they have no similitude, than that he should annex the idea of pain to the motion of a piece of steel dividing our flesh, with which that idea hath no resemblance” (E, II,8,13, p. 114). The assumption that ideas emerge under the influence of the mechanical interaction of bodily corpuscles with the sense organs when “some motion must be thence continued by our nerves or animal spirits, by some parts of our bodies, to the brain, or the seat of sensation, there to produce in our minds the particular ideas we have of them” (E, II,8,12, p. 113) requires justification on the level of metaphysics. The mechanical explanation basically refers only to the plane of the philosophy of nature (as well as physiology), while the ultimate explanation requires a reference to the activity of God. Remarkably, Leibniz also points to the

⁹ A more detailed description of the development of this idea is provided in the volume *Primary and Secondary Qualities*, ed. Lawrence Nolan (Oxford, New York: Oxford University Press, 2011). See particularly the chapters by Michael Ayers, Edwin McCann and Martha Brandt Bolton devoted to Locke and Leibniz.

insufficiency of the mechanistic description of nature. In *Monadology*, we read: “Moreover, it must be confessed that perception and that which depends on it are inexplicable in mechanical terms, that is, in terms of figures and motions” (M, 17). In his opinion, the sources of perception should be sought in the very essence of substance, its activity. “We can easily understand that in monads there is no internal motion, since there is no extension in them, and all motion is in extended things. However, in monads there is an internal action through which their internal state is changed.”¹⁰

On the other hand, in Locke’s view, the metaphysical grounding for cognition requires making a reference to three notions: the soul, material bodies, and God. However, the point is that the metaphysical notion of substance itself (other than the common sense concept, where the substance is a set of specific features manifested in experience, and the speculative notion of natural science in which substance is a collection of primary features) does not fulfil the constitutive role in theoretical philosophy. This marks a departure from the 17th century metaphysics of substance, which is plainly visible also in the discussion between Leibniz and Locke on personal identity. Both agree that the guarantor of personal identity is memory (and the testimonies of others complementing its shortcomings). Nevertheless, Leibniz distinguishes real identity (concerning substance) from moral or personal identity based on memory and self-knowledge (NE, p. 193). Also one of the reasons for his recognition of the existence of *petites perceptions* is the connection of the perception process to the essential activity of the substance itself. In this sense, if the essence of substance includes thinking, it is necessary to conclude that the soul thinks all the time. Locke allows for the occurrence of processes below the threshold of consciousness, though their existence is bound by varying degrees of attention, which can be dispersed so much that the individual content cannot be clearly separated. The distraction in this case is also an argument for Leibniz, but at the same time it refers to the metaphysical justification. In the meantime, Locke is pessimistic with regard to the metaphysical justifications and, although he sees the need for metaphysical grounding of cognition, all judgements concerning the essence of substance in his opinion are to be regarded as highly speculative. Hence, Locke concludes: “So that of substance, we have no idea of what it is, but only a confused obscure one of what it does” (E, II,13,19, p. 156).

¹⁰ Nicolas JOLLEY, “Causality and Creation in Leibniz,” in IDEM, *Causality and Mind. Essays on Early Modern Philosophy* (Oxford, New York: Oxford University Press, 2013), 151.

For Leibniz, the reduction of metaphysics to the role of the necessary completion of the system of knowledge constituted the shallowing of philosophy, and in this particular case, basing identity on self-knowledge appeared insufficient as its guarantor. For Locke, on the other hand, the direct reference to metaphysics brought no practical significance. His new way of ideas involved a new pattern of experimental knowledge, verifiable for others, for which it is firstly required to determine the meaning of the concepts used. In a sense Locke was right—the differences between his empirical and common sense philosophy and Leibnizian rationalistic idealism did not affect the analyses of specific issues. An example is their understanding of perception, namely the matter they generally agreed upon.

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LOCKE I LEIBNIZ O PERCEPCJI

Streszczenie

W swej krytyce Locke'owskiego pojęcia percepcji, przedstawionej w *Nouveaux essais*, Leibniz zarzuca angielskiemu filozofowi, że nie uwzględnił istnienia "minute perceptions" i redukuje wszystkie operacje mentalne jedynie do sfery świadomości. Wydaje się jednak, że krytyka ta wynika z odmienności stanowisk filozoficznych—idealistycznej metafizyki i zdoroworozsądkowego empiryzmu—a nie z różnicy w rozumieniu samej percepcji. Przedstawiony przez obu filozofów psychologiczny opis procesu percypowania wydaje się być zaskakująco podobny, różnica zaś stanowisk ma charakter w dużej mierze terminologiczny, a spór wynika zarówno z faktu, że w przeciwieństwie do Leibniza Locke traktuje opis psychologiczny w sposób do pewnego stopnia autonomiczny i uniezależnia go od twierdzeń metafizyki.

LOCKE AND LEIBNIZ ON PERCEPTION

Summary

In his critique of the Lockean concept of perception as presented in *Nouveaux essais*, Leibniz reproaches Locke for neglecting the role of *minute perceptions* in experience and reducing all mental operations to the sphere of consciousness. However, the critique seems to be the result of the differences of their philosophical standpoints: Leibniz's idealistic metaphysics, and Locke's commonsensical empiricism rather than of the different understanding of perception itself. The descriptions of the process of perceiving provided by them seem to be surprisingly similar, whilst the difference between their stances is for the most part no more than terminological. The dispute is rooted in their different approaches to the role of psychological investigations, which for Locke are autonomous and quite independent from the claims of metaphysics.

Słowa kluczowe: Leibniz; Locke; percepcja; idealizm; empiryzm; filozofia nowożytna

Key words: Leibniz; Locke; perception; idealism; empiricism; early modern philosophy.

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