

## 2

### The *lingua franca* of Nominalism

#### Sellars on Leibniz

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#### **Introduction**

In Sellars's interpretation of Leibniz we can identify two quite distinct, albeit internally linked, fields of inquiry: the first focuses on some technical questions of logic and philosophy of language; the second on some broader questions of epistemology, ontology and history of philosophy. In the first case, reference to Leibniz is helpful for disambiguating some internal topics of analytical metaphysics. By investigating notions such as "particulars", "proper names" and "abstract entities", Sellars, in fact, takes a stand against a contemporary debate initially triggered by Bertrand Russell, which counted Nelson Goodman, Peter Strawson and Gustav Bergmann as its closest referents (Rauzy 2009, 87). Such line of inquiry was developed in works like *On the Logic of Complex Particulars* (LCP, 1949), *Particulars* (P, 1952), *Meditations Leibnitziennes* (ML, 1959) and *Abstract Entities* (AE, 1963). In the second case, the framework of reference consists of some peculiar themes in Leibniz's philosophy, such as his theory of relations, his representational theory of mind, and the definition of truth within his overall nominalist strategy.

Sellars focuses on some specific epistemological and ontological issues that influenced much of the modern epistemological tradition, recalling authors such as Descartes, Berkeley, Hume and, above all, Kant. He refers directly to these leibnitian topics in ML, but other, more indirect references can be found in works like *Some Remarks on Kant's Theory of Experience* (KTE, 1967), *Science and Metaphysics* (SM, 1968), *Berkeley and Descartes* (BD, 1977), and in the seminars on pre-Kantian and Kantian topics (KPT).

The first line of inquiry has been analyzed by Jean-Baptiste Rauzy, who has convincingly shown how Sellars connected the controversy on “particulars” to Leibniz, as well as to Bergmann’s re-reading of Russell (Rauzy 2009, 94).<sup>1</sup> This very solid work has the merit of demonstrating how the broad topic of universals was linked in Sellars’s early writings to the more technical, and seemingly remote, issue of the nature of particulars. The second line of inquiry still remains to be thoroughly investigated, since Sellars’s interpretation of Early modern epistemology was conducted by scholars almost exclusively in relation to Descartes (Alanen 1992), Hume (Landy, 2008) and Kant in particular (Macbeth 2000, McDowell 2006, O’Shea 2011, 2016, 2017, Haag 2017, Brandom 2015, 2017). The present paper aims to fill this gap to some degree. I will therefore not refer to the issues already analyzed by Rauzy (unless it is strictly necessary), and will focus instead on the previously mentioned epistemological and ontological topics. Significantly, Sellars claimed in his *Introductory Remarks to the Class* (KPT 2) that “One of the most interesting topics a person wants to work on is the relation of certain features of Kant's thought to the corresponding features of Leibniz's thought”. Paraphrasing his words, we could perhaps say that one of the most interesting topics a person could work on is the relation of certain features of Sellars’s thought to the corresponding features of Kant’s and Leibniz’s thought.

## 1.

Taking some first steps along the path of Sellars's interpretation of Leibniz, we can start with how he interprets the doctrine of the complete concept.<sup>2</sup> Sellars begins by referring to the classic quotation from section eight of the *Discourse on Metaphysics*:

It is indeed true that when several predicates are attributed to a single subject and this subject is attributed to no other, it is called an individual substance; but this is not sufficient, and such explanation is merely nominal. We must therefore consider what it is to be attributed truly to a certain subject. Now it is evident that all true predication has some basis in the nature of things and that, when a proposition is not an identity, that is, when the predicate is not explicitly contained in the subject, it must be contained in it virtually. That is what the philosophers call *in-esse*, when they say that the predicate is in the subject. (*Philosophical Essays*, 40-41)

In ML Sellars begins to disambiguate the notion of individual concept by using two kinds of conceptual tools, which will gradually become more and more entwined. The first concerns the question of *proper names*: the individual concept nominates the individual - not in the sense that we, finite subjects, nominate a possible individual, but rather in the sense in which God gives a proper name to each individual in the very act of creation (ML, 153-154). The second conceptual tool focuses instead on the distinction between *concept* and *nature*, specifying that the individual concept has a double level of existence: it exists in the divine's understanding as a logical concept, and *in re* as the nature of a substance (ML, 154). Individuals are conceived in modal terms (as mere logical possibilities of the divine's mind) on the one hand, while on the other they

are factually considered as natural substances existing in the world.

Sellars says that the “venerable” notion of individual nature thus took a new twist in Leibniz’s hands, since he was the first

to see clearly that the individuality of a substance can only be understood in terms of episodes in its history, and to conclude that if the nature of a substance is to account for its individuality, it must account for episodes, and not merely the capacities, powers, dispositions [...] which were traditionally connected with the natures of things” (ML, 154).

Accordingly, the nature of a substance indicates more than just a dispositional property (as traditionally claimed by the post–Aristotelian tradition - APM, 545; Rauzy 2009, 93), but Leibniz reworks it better in terms of conditional episodes. He says that the nature of an individual substance, *if we but knew it*, would explain why an individual “behaves as it does in the circumstances in which it is placed” (ML, 154). The nature of a substance somehow captures all the *episodic premises* that lie behind the behavior of a given individual. In this context, Sellars applies to Leibniz a logical model drawn from C.D. Broad, which enables episodes to be interpreted as conditional premises of a series, such that “if at any time S were to be involved in an episode of kind E<sub>1</sub>, it would be involved in an episode of kind E<sub>2</sub>” (ML, 154). Sellars thus describes Leibniz’s concept of nature by logically appealing to a whole series of conditionals that, chained together, form the premise “of a syllogism *in re*” (ML, 155; Rauzy 2009, 93).

The result produces a sort of modal stress, however, because - as Sellars points out - Leibniz conflates two different models here: he uses the so-called “thing–nature” framework of the Aristotelian tradition on the one hand, while on the other he refers to the “event–law” framework

that dominated the lexicon of science from the 17<sup>th</sup> century onwards (APM, 546, 565-566). The first model, more closely reflecting common sense, assumes that some natural *kinds of things* exist, grow and develop according to an internal framework. It consequently admits the (ontological) presence of substantial forms representing the metaphysical core of each substance. By contrast, instead of referring immediately to “things”, the second model focuses specifically on the lawful dimension of nature: scientists do not know what kinds of things are there until they arrive at laws “which can be translated into the thing language” (APM, 566). In this case, it is the nomological element that determines what properties are needed in order to be “a thing” (*res*), so we are no longer speaking of a substance, but rather of “events”. The latter indicates a sort of relational structures that does not spring from a central core, but consists in a process of reciprocal functional correlations.

Returning to Leibniz, the nature of a substance would therefore occupy an amphibious position, since it would contain both episodic facts (in accordance with the *thing–nature* framework of the Aristotelian tradition) and hypothetical facts conforming to the modern *event–law* lexicon. Indeed, given the operational presence of the *Principle of Sufficient Reason*, episodes prove to be reducible into hypotheticals, so the first model can be collapsed into the second (ML, 156).<sup>3</sup> Individual substances are therefore the outcome of a strange twist taken by Leibniz, and Sellars argues that the source of this conceptual *mélange* should be sought in his remote doctrine of relations. The Aristotelian realistic conception of relations met with some well-known difficulties in explaining the connection between particulars and universals, as Sellars recalls. Leibniz, for his part, worked within this late–Aristotelian context. Renewing the lexicon of inherence (accidents that *inhere* to matter), he established a new epistemic status for relations (KPT, 257), in what Sellars judges a “brilliant metaphysical move”. This, in turn, produced a kind of snowball effect

as it soon changed the traditional approach to the very concept of “truth” and the modern concept of “representation”. More generally, it reshaped some of the most solid epistemic principles of Early Modern times (like the general distinction between “subject” and “object”), giving new power to a pure nominalist position.

## 2.

At the beginning of the previously–quoted passage, Leibniz said that “when several predicates are attributed to a single subject and this subject is attributed to no other, it is called an individual substance”. He promptly added, however, that this is not enough, because such an explanation is “merely nominal”. So we need to investigate what it is to be “attributed truly” to a certain subject. What seems to interest Sellars is the term “attribute”, and in particular the fact that attributes cannot be conceived as abstract entities (KPT, 249). Sellars says we are not dealing with linguistic facts, since the context has a rather theological background, referring to God’s knowledge of individuals. The idea is, more or less, that statements like “Socrates is wise” are only true if the attribute of being wise is a constitutive element of the corresponding judgment pronounced by God (KPT, 250). Hypothetically, wisdom might even not figure among *our* criteria for identifying Socrates (as it was for many of his Athenian peers), because what really matters is the “basis in the nature of things”. It is only in divine judgments that predicates are necessarily involved in the subject and therefore metaphysically true.

The same topic can be considered from a different point of view, focusing on the problem of relations: if the nature of Socrates involves everything that is true of him, then it will also be true of him that, at some time in his life, he stood on the Agora. In this case, we have to consider how a spatial relation (being on the Agora) can be true of Socrates, and how it can be included in

his nature (KPT, 252). We can tell in advance where the whole argument is leading: relations (of any kind) have a mere phenomenic nature, insofar as they can be considered as predicates that inhere to a subject, and they are eventually transformed by Leibniz into representative states of individual substances (monads). But what we need to understand is precisely what this means.

One important element to consider is the historical distinction drawn by Descartes between “formal” and “objective” reality. In an act–content model of representation, Sellars argues, we have to distinguish between two ways of being. There is a “second class of existence”, in which the content depends entirely on the act of representing (“objective” existence); and there is a “first class of existence”, in which being is not dependent on a mental act (“formal” or “actual” existence - KPT, 9). There are consequently also two kinds of truth. There are things that are metaphysically true, in the sense that they actually have a kind of existence; but there are also second–class truths concerning represented objects, which are considered true only by virtue of the fact that they correspond to some entities in the first class. Sellars attributes the utmost importance to this distinction in many of his writings. In his view, it represents “the whole key of the epistemology of this period”, for here we have the primary source of “a correspondence theory of experience” (KPT, 8-9).<sup>4</sup>

Leibniz’s theory of relations does indeed seem to develop along the lines of a correspondence theory of truth, though this is actually undermined from within because he completely rewrites notions like “correspondence” or “counterpart” (as does Kant later on). While for Descartes and Newton, actual things are those existing in the absolute dimension of space and time, for Leibniz every sort of relational structure can have no such existence, but must always inhere to a substance. Space and time have no actual existence, only an objective one. The fact that the individual  $S_1$  represents a triangle does not mean that a real triangle “absolutely” exists. Des-

cartes might have endorsed it, but for Leibniz (and later for Kant) there can be no actual space because the whole point is to determine precisely what it means to be “actual” (KPT, 253). According to Leibniz, the idea of an extended universe being formally there makes no sense. As a matter of fact, a radical schism gave rise to the Early Modern age: for the Cartesians and Newtonians, as well as for most of the empiricist tradition, the physical universe has an eminently mind-independent space-time existence. Leibniz had another kind of intuition, which was quite the opposite: the notion of a stand-alone universe would make no sense without the actual presence of individuals endowed with perception, so the objective existence of the former can be considered as part of the formal representative character of the latter. The physical universe is not self-contained, but compatible and integrated with a system of actual representing subjects.<sup>5</sup>

This brings us, of course, to the very core of Leibniz’s nominalism. In a metaphysical sense, only substances (and their properties) exist: “Indeed, considering the matter carefully, we must say that there is nothing in things, but simple substances, and in them, perception and appetite (*Philosophical Essays*, 181)”.<sup>6</sup> The consequences are clearly enormous because the very idea of “objective” existence (like the space-time primary dimension) is called into question. Only representing substances are actual, while the physical universe (with its space-time relations) becomes an objectively represented world. Leibniz stretches the old Cartesian distinction between “formal” and “objective” existence to its limits, and Sellars is keen to remind us that, if we do not take this idea seriously, then “Leibniz doesn’t exist at all” (KPT, 253). He adds that Kant will suffer the same fate because he packs “a new meaning into the word *actual*” in his *Critique*, and he is indeed “very close to Leibniz” (KPT, 253-254). Briefly put, the very idea of “actuality” was reshaped (albeit in different ways) by Leibniz and Kant, and that is why they were both driven to explore a new meaning for the expression “being true”. The sense of the old dictum



*adaequatio mentis et rei* now lacked the material counterpart that consists, according to the Cartesian and Newtonian traditions, in the absolute spatiality of bodies.

To clarify this main idea, which marked a pivotal turning point in the epistemology of the Modern age, Sellars proposes to approach the issue from a different angle. If we imagine a system of three monadic individuals,  $S_1$ ,  $S_2$  and  $S_3$ , we can try to understand how the phenomenal domain of space is engendered by their representations. In outer space, Sellars says, “an object is between object and object”, meaning that spatial relations essentially involve ongoing continuity (“something being beyond something”). The object in question occupies a certain region in space, which is further determined by its relation to another region in space, and so on (KPT, 254-255). In our tiny monadic system, we thus have three monads that are not spatially related, but they are capable of representative states. As Sellars suggests, let us suppose that the monad  $S_2$  represents  $S_1$ , with the result that  $S_1$  will objectively exist in  $S_2$  (being *represented* therein). If we also suppose that  $S_1$  represents  $S_3$  (considering such representing acts in the broad terms of what Leibniz would call *petites perceptions*), then  $S_2$  not only represents  $S_1$  but also (albeit unwittingly) represents the state of  $S_1$  that represents  $S_3$ . To comment on this situation, we can say that  $S_2$  has a first-order representation of  $S_1$  and a second-order representation of  $S_3$ ; or that  $S_2$  represents  $S_1$  directly and  $S_3$  indirectly (KPT, 255). Needless to say, the game can go on and on, in a process based on the idea that every monad always represents every other monad, as well as every state of every other monad.

In other words, Leibniz thinks that our *petites perceptions* are infinitely complex, not just in the sense that there are infinitely many of them, but that they are complex in an interesting dimension that is usually overlooked: they are infinitely complex in this ‘nested-

ness' as I put it. (KPT, 255)<sup>7</sup>

What emerges from this continuous process of internal representative mediation is that the phenomenic experience of “something that is beyond something” is grounded in the indirect nature of a substance’s representation. “That is all I’m driving at”, Sellars concludes, emphasizing the structural similarity between such a “nesting of representations” and the corresponding spatial “beyondness”.<sup>8</sup> The metaphysical key to the story is thus as follows: Leibniz begins by describing what we ordinarily regard as a real relation between objects, then turns it into an ideal factor that must be explained in terms of the nature of the perceiving substance. Notions like “truth” and “existence” hover there too, insofar as they are implicit in his commitment to a strong form of nominalism that we will try to develop later on.

Now the main question becomes: why did Leibniz question the idea that objects have spatial relationships instead of leaving things as they stood? Sellars suggests that the origin of his very counter-intuitive solution was rooted in classical puzzles concerning the (mainly Aristotelian) concept of substance, particularly those treating the relationships between substances and accidents. To say “this leaf is green”, for instance, was classically regarded as an example of the inherent relation between substance and accident, which posed the tough problem of how to interpret the relationship between the particular green of a single leaf and “greenness” in general. The problem can be better defined, says Sellars, if we think of two leaves sharing the same shade of green (like a “Forest Green, Pittsburgh Paint #59”): do each of the two substances possess their own green, or should we assume that there is only one “Forest-Green-59” instantiated by two different substances? Here we come up against the classical contrast between the idea of an individual qualitative identity and the notion of a numerically identical universal (KPT, 258).

Leibniz's insight, at least according to Sellars's reconstruction of it, was more or less as follows: relational predicates can be expressed in the general form of:

$$S_1 \text{ is } R \text{ to } S_2$$

Hence the puzzle of exactly where R should be placed, because it can go on the side of  $S_1$  (considering R as part of it), or on the side of  $S_2$ , or we can even imagine that R inheres to both terms or to neither of them. Leibniz instead took the view that such a proposition should be treated as a special case of:

$$S \text{ is } P$$

and thus

$$S_1 \text{ is } R\text{--to--}S$$
$$(P)$$

Leibniz supported the idea that an R-to- $S_2$  predicate is inherent in  $S_1$ . So he accepted the consequence that  $S_2$  must be in  $S_1$  (*inesse*) and, as Sellars points out, he reinterpreted such commitments in the light of the Cartesian distinction between "objective" and "actual" being (ML, 159). He therefore interpreted facts in the form of

$$S_1 \text{ is } R \text{ to } S_2$$

as facts in the form of

$S_1$  represents  $S_2$ .

Once again, relations are transformed into representative states of a formally existing substance. The relational fact is but a well-founded phenomenon, the objective existence of which has nothing to do with the idea of the naive realism mainly accepted by the empiricists. From a realistic stance, there is a kind of extra-epistemic fact (“being green”) that exists in itself, irrespective of the current representative status of  $S_1$ .<sup>9</sup> Leibniz’s extreme nominalist position was intended precisely as a way to escape from both naive realism and abstract Platonism. Once and for all, “there is nothing in things except simple substances, and in them perception and appetite”. The key is understanding the structure of the inner nature of substances.

### 3.

Needless to say, Sellars was strongly in favor of a theoretical shift that enabled relations to be transformed into categorical facts (remember *The logic of “looks”* or *The logic of “means”* in EPM)<sup>10</sup> In fact, one of the most interesting possible applications of this approach regards causality. In Leibniz’s world, facts in the form of

$S_2$  is acted on by  $S_1$  (i.e., by being in a state  $f$ ,  $S_1$  causes  $S_2$  to become  $p$ ) (ML, 160)

easily become facts taking the form

$S_2$  represents the fact that  $S_1$  is in the state  $f$

and thus

$S_2$  represents  $S_1$

The notion of causality is therefore revised on the basis of the Cartesian distinction between objective and formal being. Like relations, causes are merely *represented*, not *representing*. Leibniz's universe is composed of individual substances, and the worldly things they run into during their life-span must be seen as part of their personal story, as the representative stuff making up the fabric of their nature. This view, however, brings us back to a problem considered earlier. Assuming that Leibniz has effectively turned causes and relationships into ideal representations, how do we envision the bond that collectively holds together the representative states of a substance? How should we interpret the nature of this bond? Why, Sellars asks, should we not continue alongside Broad in interpreting episodic facts in terms of hypothetical facts, taking for granted "that both episodes and hypotheticals are grounded in Necessary Being?" (ML, 162). The starting point of the problem, we remember, was: "if at any time  $S$  were to be involved in an episode of kind  $E_1$ , it would be involved in an episode of kind  $E_2$ ". According to Sellars, Leibniz would not have been wholly comfortable with such a conclusion because of the metaphysical premises of his system. Nowadays, we tend to think along the lines of a distinction between causal properties (as general hypotheticals) and occurrent states (as categoricals), but Leibniz - like most of his predecessors - interpreted causal properties in terms of "desires, plans, personal

commitments”.

Thus, whereas *we* might be inclined to interpret the statement ‘Jones has a strong desire to go to New York’ in terms of conditional facts about Jones, Leibniz thinks of a strong desire as a continuing series of episodes which tends to develop into going to New York and will continue to develop if not impeded (ML, 162).

Leibniz sees  $S_2$  becoming  $p$  as a matter of  $S_2$  *having a plan* to become  $p$ . In other words, he interprets the “becoming” as a sort of actually “doing” something, so though the “plan” to become  $p$  may be hypothetical, it is nonetheless interpreted as a categorical fact regarding  $S_2$ . We can hardly avoid referring here to the pivotal part played by the distinction that Sellars himself drew between the “ought to do” and the “ought to be” rules in the construction of his own nominalist position, but there is nonetheless a sense, according to Leibniz’s own position, that “all the fundamental facts about a substance are *episodic facts*” (ML, 162).<sup>11</sup> The consequences are huge, since “nature” no longer indicates a law-like hypothetical function (as would seem obvious to us), but rather a “life-plan”, and “as such it has *esse intentionale* as the content of an abiding aspiration” (ML, 162). Broad’s hypothetical law-like notion is ultimately replaced by a concept of nature as “something that is always there” (KPT, 252) and wholly involved in every single episode in the life of an individual substance. Sellars uses the sentence “Socrates is wise” as an example of a statement that helps us to see that “wisdom” is not a momentary state of Socrates, but an enduring trait that is somehow “a characteristic of this life plan” (KPT, 252).

To sum up this line of reasoning we can say that the individuality of a substance is identified by the complete concept; the latter is explained as the sum of the representative states of the

former; every single representative episode is logically described by the nature of the substance (i.e. by the presence of a life-plan that acts as a self-governed source of justification); the epistemic status of relations is founded on metaphysical, and therefore not relational, grounds (the divine's decision to create a world of multiple, mutually-compatible individuals); finally, causes and relations are reduced to representative states of the subject and, as such, they are treated like predicates that inhere to a substance (*praedicatum inest subjecto*) and, once again, to its nature. The circle is almost complete. What is still missing is a key term that we now need to analyze because, in some ways, it provides the ultimate sense of Sellars's interpretation of Leibniz. Of course, the term in question is "truth".

#### 4.

Leibniz's thesis of the *inesse* is supported by several considerations regarding the nature of truth. The issue can first be summarized as follows: the representative, temporally-tensed, episodes of a substance conform to a corresponding set of timeless facts in the mind of God. Adopting a correspondence theory of truth, a given representative episode  $R_1$  is true if and only if it corresponds to a timeless fact  $F_1$  that represents the real counterpart of  $R_1$  in the mind of God. A statement like this calls into question both the notion of truth and the concept of time. As Sellars points out, we can say of an episode it took place, is taking place, or will take place, but a fact is a fact: it is a fact that  $2+2=4$ , and it makes no sense to say that  $2+2$  was 4 or that it will be 4 (ML, 163). In some contexts at least, "being a fact" is a timeless mode of being. In Sellars's view, Leibniz assumes that

there is a timeless set of entities (i.e., facts) which are about what happens to a substance

at different times, and such that it is by virtue of corresponding to these entities that our statements and judgments about the substance are true (ML, 163).

The plot for this “ontology of truth” is quite difficult to unfold, however, since Leibniz, in Sellars’s view, conflated the notion of timeless fact and the notion of life–plan. He, in fact, assumed the very first notion as the actual guidance of his thought and as a consequence a sort of internal pressure was generated in his whole system (ML, 164). The core question thus becomes: what does it mean to be a “fact”? Leaving aside all the surrounding statements, it is Sellars himself who champions an “over–simplified thesis”, according to which claims of the form:

It is a fact that–p

are simply another way of saying

“P” is a true statement in *our* language (ML,167).

The purported idea here is that the element of truthfulness lies not in a kind of supporting extra–linguistic factor (as in the most classic correspondence theory of truth) but in the intrinsic coherence that ties some statements in our language together. In Sellars’s opinion, this whole issue is pivotal and also calls Kant into question, because in both cases it seems possible to detect a peculiar form of coherentism proposed as the ground floor of truth. So, before proceeding with Leibniz, let us take a brief look at Kant’s own insights.



## 5.

According to Sellars, correspondence theories of truth, in the Early Modern age at least, have been mainly grounded on a representational model of knowledge (KPT, 8). Employing a lexicon that refers to the classical quasi–Cartesian epistemological framework, Sellars claims that, in considering such theories, we have to be very careful to distinguish between: (i) the “act” of representing performed by the subject; (ii) the objective “content” of the intended representation; and (iii) the real object in the outer space–time world.<sup>12</sup> We thus have the individual’s actual thoughts (“*representings*”), some represented content (“*represented*”), and transcendent real objects (“*unrepresented representings*”) that together constitute the ur–type of a relational model of knowledge, which Sellars calls “the Cheshire cat form” of relation (KPT, 12).<sup>13</sup>

On several occasions Sellars emphasizes that here we are only dealing with an illusory form of relation because, on the basis of the content represented, we would be led to imagine a one–to–one correspondence between the immanent represented content and the transcendent object of the real world. Yet, this is the weak point of the model, since the only real relationship entertained is the one occurring between the act of representing and the immanent represented content, not the one between represented contents and transcendent objects. The claim that we can immediately relate our knowledge to things in themselves raises the prospect of a “transcendental realism” that Kant himself helps us to unveil (KPT, 25; SM 47).<sup>14</sup> Transcendental realists are those who mistake the epistemic conditions of our referring to objects (like space and time) for properties of things *in themselves*. What has only epistemic value is assumed instead to be a transcendent object. In other words, the “*an sich*” world would be the ultimate ground of givenness and would provide the possibility for a truthful theory of correspondence.

Sellars’s insight is that at the bottom of such relational structure lies the attempt to offer a

plausible explanation for the case of intersubjectively shared representations. If we consider two people sharing the same representative content, we are almost compelled to imagine that they both refer to a common item of experience, given independently from any form of subjective representation. Furthermore, according to the Cartesian tradition, the existence of such independent content would reflect God's representation of it in his divine mind (KPT, 20). So we have the represented item, the real-worldly objects, and the archetypal items in the mind of God. This complex theory of transcendence later on evolves into what Sellars calls a "theological conceptualism", the most famous interpreter of which was Kant himself (KPT, 36). Indeed leaving aside the theological premises of the Cartesian discourse, the idea that the very possibility of representing an object has to do with the existence of a certain domain of "representables" can still be found in Kant: "in a certain sense, there must be a domain of representables, *qua* representables, and among them is, for example, a triangle (KPT, 19)."<sup>15</sup>

Kant needs this sort of assumption to break the private dimension of the subject, since representables are conceived of as a public domain, as a public source of possible knowledge. We need to bear in mind that, in Kantian terms, the argument does not claim that there is a class of representables and, consequently, that the foundation of empirical knowledge is also provided; instead, it shows

that the concept [of empirical knowledge, A.N.] is a coherent one and that it is such and such as to rule out the possibility that there could be empirical knowledge not implicitly of the form 'such and such a state of affairs belongs to a coherent system of states of affairs of which my perceptual experiences are a part' (KTE, 271).<sup>16</sup>

At the heart of the argument there is a purely epistemological issue and, in Sellars's opinion, the nearest ancestor of this view was Leibniz himself, with his theory of God's continuous representation of all possible worlds (KPT, 22). The main point is that, since Kant says that one cannot refer to "things" outside the realm of representations (the "in itself" of a thing is not representable, not even by analogy), the result is that the notion of truth is construed from inside the notion of representability. The next step, in fact, is that such a domain of representables becomes "the domain of items which are *candidates* for being transcendent objects" (KPT, 23-24).<sup>17</sup> This is a truly fundamental remark because it implies that the transcendent domain of things is construed on the basis of an epistemic shift: a particular class of well-cohering representeds almost unwittingly becomes a class of transcendent items that, from that point on, will be regarded as part of a mind-independent world. As Sellars sees it, the point is that what we usually call an "actual state of affairs" is effectively "*a conceptual response*" endowed with an internal "judgmental form". So much so that:

"comparing a judging with a state of affairs" could only be comparing a judging with another judging of the same specific kind, and this would no more be a verification than would checking one copy of today's *Times* by reading another (KTE, 275).<sup>18</sup>

The whole business implicit in the lexicon of "correspondence" is therefore highly metaphorical: this is the final destination of Sellars's conceptual-historical analysis. Kant was an idealist with respect to the world of appearances, in the sense that he simply denied that anything in space and time could have any form of being other than a second-class one (KPT, 25). Yet, truth statements involve something more to be defined: they demand the presence of a small group of

available representable contents that “*cohere* in a certain way”.

In a curious sense, they are the actual, or true, ones, but, for Kant, they are not true in any “correspondence” sense. They are just privileged ones which *must* be there *if* the notion of truth is to make sense. So, Kant is not trying to prove that there *is* truth, that there *is* knowledge or that there *are* objects: he is *explicating* the very concept of an objectively true experience (KTE, 275).

In Kant we find a notion of truth that partly corresponds to the realistic insights of the Early Modern age. The very notion of “privileged content” somehow replaces the old metaphysical facts of the space–time world of Descartes or Newton and, as a result, a certain form of realism (*scientific* realism, one might cautiously say) has indeed been effectively achieved, by an internal development of the notion of representability itself. Of course, Kant was not a nominalist - and this is another, remarkable point (and probably the most crucial) where his and Leibniz’s paths cross. In Kant’s theory of truth, Sellars observes, there is “a great deal of weight on coherence”, since it is the very concept of coherence that shoulders the whole burden of truthfulness. More concretely, in the *Analogy of the Experience* Kant considers a special sub–class of coherent representables as though they were “contents pertaining to the physical world obeying the laws of physics” (KPT, 141). This is the decisive epistemic step: such representables have a “physical lawfulness” in the technical sense that they owe this kind of coherence to the properties studied by mechanics in the physics of the time. But this also shows how Kant was constructing a sort of scientific realism, though its meaning had been dramatically reshaped by comparison with the naive realism of Early Modern times. In other words, Kant gave a new shape to the traditional

issue of the primary qualities of bodies, partly by excluding the world of secondary qualities (e.g. colors) from the range of knowable things (KPT, 45). This move marked a great departure from Leibniz, who saw little difference between primary and secondary qualities, given that the latter too played an essential role in determining the nature of an individual substance.

In Leibniz's nominalist world, as we have seen, there are only representing monadic individuals, to which relations are reduced. Therefore, unlike Kant, space, time and other sorts of relations possess an ontological counterpart that we are able to account for (KPT, 51-53). Leibniz's final theory, in fact, is that our representative knowledge is but the counterpart of the actual existence of a large set of compossible substances, whose representation nevertheless is always confused, because of the infinite complexity of their nestedness. For Kant, on the other hand, representations can hardly be confused, because the very concept of "actual" was deprived of any metaphysical sense, and the "in-itself" of things was by no means intended to have an individuating nature. Kant's stance is rather transcendental, since it considers the problem of the objectivity of representations in the epistemic terms of their construability (KPT, 75). Yet, even when Kant bids farewell to Leibniz, the theoretical structure of his thought brings him back to the latter. According to Sellars, the system of representables draws a sharp distinction between what one actually represents and what one would represent "if" she found herself in a potentially different situation. In other words, it sets up a distinction between "actual" and "possible" experiences.

Indeed, the whole matter of coherence generates a modal issue, since it does not simply refer to some aseptic content but always presupposes the possession of some scientific perspective. If we consider the history of physics, for example, the objective existence of any coherent content is unavoidably consistent with a certain blend of variable perspectives that imply paradigm

shifts, new discoveries, scientific progress, and so on. The privileged representables are hence by Sellars called “iffy” representables, in the sense that they are available from a certain perspective, like the current scientific image of the world, but are not eternal like a Platonic idea. Acknowledging this therefore involves the possibility of other different perspectives, so much so that the whole system of coherence must be “temporalized” (KPT, 141). In short, the law-like problem of Kant’s physical world comes face to face with Leibniz’s modal question concerning the nomological legitimacy of other possible worlds (KPT, 141). According to Sellars, this topic is only hinted at in Kant’s works, and that is why “the small clues that Kant throws out when he is discussing possible experiences” are so baffling (KPT, 141). This final comment thus gives us a chance to return to Leibniz for the last time.

## 6.

In Leibniz we investigated the idea of an individual substance conceived as a set of representative episodes; we explored the idea that this would correspond to a timeless class of events; we then faced the question “what does it mean to be a *fact*?”, reporting Sellars’s claim that a fact is simply a true statement in our language. The reference to Kant allowed us to clarify the profound nature of facts: they are subclasses of coherent statements in our language, namely a “conceptual response”. This is true for Leibniz too, even if in his case the situation is possibly more complicated, given the difference between our language and God’s. In Leibniz we also find a seemingly verificationist approach, which is however internally undermined, since the world of timeless facts is but a world of true statements. A first consequence of this is that the concept of nature can be formulated in such a way that it requires no use of facts. Sellars notes that when we assert something as:

The statement “ $S_1$  will be  $f_3$  in 1959” is true *because* it is a fact that  $S_1$  will be  $f_3$  in 1959 (ML, 167).

the proper “because statement” can be formulated differently as:

The statement “ $S_1$  will be  $f_3$  in 1959” is true because  $S_1$  *will be*  $f_3$  in 1959.

This is the “promissory note character” of Leibniz’s notion of nature, which “requires no ontology of facts” because it carries in itself “a pervasive feature of the statements we are in a position to make about the world” (ML, 167). Truth has to do with an internal development of the metaphysical nature of substances and - insofar as they are all distinguishable, and therefore nameable - the next step is to disambiguate the role played by proper names in the structure of God’s language. We have already discussed the distinction between our language and the divine’s language, but now we need to put it under pressure, since it is through the latter that proper names were originally chosen.

7.

Opening this new line of inquiry, Sellars makes the point that although proper names are essentially related to “definite descriptions” or “demonstratives”, they are actually reducible to neither (ML, 168). The use of demonstratives assumes that the speaker locates herself in a shared world of space–time objects, but this can only be accomplished by referring to names and definite descriptions of enduring things and it therefore demands the ability “to recognize a named or

described object as *this* object”. The first provisional conclusion is, thus, that a mutual relationship exists between demonstratives and descriptions (ML, 168). The issue is subtler and intriguing, however:

“Granted that names are an irreducible mode of reference, what are the implications of the idea that every individual thing is *nameable*?” For if anything is a central fact in Leibniz’s metaphysics, it is that he clearly assumes that every substance is nameable, and I believe that the recognition of this fact throws a flood of light on his system (ML, 169).

Names are allegedly an irreducible mode of reference and the “Principle of Nameability” says that every individual substance is different, reminding us of the principle of indiscernibles. Yet, the question is: what kind of substances are we referring to? Are we dealing with real or possible individuals? Strictly speaking, the proper name is a criterion that distinguishes its nominatum from all other individuals. But while *we* tend to think that the individual concept specifies only a few facts about the nominatum, Leibniz believes that the individual concept specifies everything the nominatum does or experiences throughout its career (ML, 170). Once again, Leibniz is concerned with God’s sense of names. If we assume that God can nominate every logically possible substance (not only actual ones), it follows that we might wonder whether the possible coincides with the nameable, or whether the former are broader in extent than the latter (ML, 171). The question is striking, given that Leibniz distinguishes the concept of possibility from the more restrictive one of compossibility. In Leibniz’s scheme of things, being possible is not enough to ensure actual being, since every possible individual must also prove to be compatible with a number of other individuals. Hence the problem is to understand to which of the following



two cases the nameability will belong:

1) if nameability coincides with logical possibility, then the individual concept must provide a complete description of its nominatum, so that it can be distinguished from any other individual (whether it exists or not);

2) if nameability is conceived in the more restrictive sense of compossibility, the individual concept will provide a sufficient, though incomplete description of its nominatum. In this case, the distinguishability of substances would not be completely internal, but would follow from the “distinguishability of the worlds” (ML, 171-172).

Sellars suggests that Leibniz opted for the latter solution and, in so doing, he undercut his requirement that “the individual concept selects a substance in terms of a complete description”. But what is at stake behind the nameability of a possible substance? To find out, we have to change our approach. As Sellars says, we have to consider that the primary sense of “possible” in Leibniz resembles a “state of affairs”, like when we say:

It is possible that Tom will get well (ML, 172).

One could say that such a claim naturally presupposes the actual existence of an individual, namely a person called Tom. Yet, this objection is not as sound as it seems, however, since we may well ask: “How can one properly argue that there are no *possible* things on the ground that possible states of affairs concern *actual* things?” (ML, 172). We might actually accept the idea that a “derivative use” of *possible* can be introduced, as in:

There is a possible man in the corner = It is possible that there is a man in the corner (ML, 173).

Basically, the idea is that we can refer to possible things because of the possibility of producing true statements in our language. So, when we say “it is possible that Tom will get well” or “it is possible that there is a man in the corner”, the common ground is that they are both used to produce true statements. The way in which Leibniz approached this modal topic thus has to do with the possibility of constructing true linguistic statements: the idea is that God needs possible worlds in order to build true statements, and thereby produces an actual world. In Sellars’s view, the final page of the story consists in intending the possibles as part of a process that imply the creation of an actual world, according to the model of a fictional speech. Here is the passage:

What I am suggesting is that at the back of Leibnitz’ mind is the picture of God as making use, within the fictional rubric, of alternative languages, and by so doing conceiving of alternative sets of individual substances (ML, 180).

and the conclusion:

According to this picture, the model for *creation* is obviously the removing of the fictional rubric from one of these languages; the move, on God’s part, from “Suppose that there were such and such things” to “There are such and such things,” *via* “Let there be such and such things” (ML, 180).

The actual world takes shape as the result of a functional process in which fictional degrees (possible–but–not–actual statements) gradually decrease until a complete individual has been produced. To create means to declassify the fictionality of a language. Needless to say, the very possibility of a fictional discourse presupposes some sense of actuality, just as a Dickens has to exist *prior* to an *Oliver Twist*. But Leibniz seems to extend this dimension of possibility even to God, given that on his account God is an entity that necessarily exists but only if it is possible (ML, 181). This is the last metaphysical step that Sellars develops in his *Meditations*. The Divine Understanding is the locus of possibles, namely the place where a creative process occurs and different alternatives are taking shape. This also explains why the final output (the actual world) remains contingent, since the very fact of being created brings with it a whole bundle of not–actualized possibilities that contribute to defining how the process is accomplished.<sup>19</sup>

The matter could even be approached in reverse: we might say that possible substances are a prerequisite in the process, since God is but the thought of possibilities. In that case, the conclusion is that, while defining the nature of His possible characteristics, God also defines Himself. In defining the nature of the individuals that will populate the world, God also defines the actuality of His own language. Sellars, thus, paradoxically concludes his essay on Leibniz by saying that it is through us and our present existence that God discovers Himself: “If my positive argument is correct, the actuality of God, as of anything else, would presuppose *our* existence as discoverers of God (ML, 181)”. It is as if God were like the mind of a novelist lighting up when facing the possibility of giving life to some possible characters in a coherent novel. Such activity gradually takes more definite shape and finally gives names to its creatures. By naming them, God also names Himself as their author - adding His signature, as it were, to His own creation.<sup>20</sup>

## Conclusion

The analysis conducted so far has attempted to retrace the main lines along which Sellars interpreted Leibniz. It is now time to look at how and, above all, from what standpoint his interpretation should be assessed. This is no easy task, and the reader will have realized that we have largely avoided introducing interpretative issues so as not to complicate matters even further. However, if we were to adopt the criteria of a historiographic assessment, then we should also acknowledge that Sellars:

- refers very little to direct sources (he almost exclusively cites the *Discourse on Metaphysics*, with a few indirect references to the *New Essays* and *Monadology*, at most);
- refers very little to any critical literature (only mentioning Russell and Broad, while the works of Couturat, for example, which also marked a decisive turning point in Leibniz studies, are never named);
- sometimes comes up with philologically inaccurate claims (the doctrine of relationships is not as Sellars presents it; the notion of complete concept is not so unequivocal; and the question of representational solipsism is less straightforward than it appears);
- employs decontextualized analytical tools (the whole issue of proper names and the reference to particulars are things that do not belong to Leibniz's apparatus);
- sometimes advances arguments that are not reflected in the texts (such as the way in which God conceives creation, and ML's final arguments).

Even so, there are just as many important elements to consider. Adopting broader filters in

our assessment, we realize that Sellars:

- clearly grasps some of the most insightful and crucial points of Leibniz's thought: the internal pressure between a 'thing–nature framework' and a 'law–event framework' is a core feature of his historically–shaped philosophy on which contemporary interpreters largely agree (Di Bella 2005); the doctrine of relationships, though internally more complex, is certainly a fundamental part of his thought (Mugnai 1992); and the theme of heritage of topics from Leibniz in Kant is equally crucial and surprisingly topical (Look, *in press*);

- also construes part of his own philosophical strategy in terms of a comparison with Leibniz: the idea of 'fact' as 'true statement in our language' (SM, 116; ML, 167), and the idea that relationships can be transformed into categorical facts (ML, 162) are just two of the most striking examples of this.

We can thus arrive at some general considerations about how Sellars saw the relationship between philosophy and the history of philosophy. It could be said that he espouses a holistic conception of the history of philosophy. To paraphrase the myth of the genius Jones, we might say that, as private speeches are forged from public language, so too can 'private' philosophical insights be framed solely on the grounds of an internalization of public (historically produced) philosophy. From this point of view, the idea of the history of philosophy as the *lingua franca* of thought would be a matter not only of mere communication, but also of the *production* of ideas. It is true that Sellars's reconstructions are very often ideal–typical rather than historical, but it is also true that he was working at a time when specialization had yet to produce its disruptive effects. The subsequent fortunes of the historiography on Leibniz help us to understand this point:

up until the Sixties, works published on Leibniz were relatively few and often unsatisfactory. But the decades that followed saw an exponential increase in intensity of critical debates, due to the parallel activities and publications produced by the Leibniz–Archiv (1962), the international Leibniz–Kongressen (from 1966 onwards), and the *Studia Leibnitiana* review (1969). After their arrival on the scene, most previous studies suddenly became obsolete. Sellars was a true precursor from this point of view because, despite all his philological limitations, his approach was new in the analytical world. Through his ideas on the relationship between philosophy and the history of philosophy, he generated something that simply had not been done before, starting a trend that is still of great interest today: the idea that philosophy is both a theoretical and, *at the same time*, an intrinsically historical discipline. This is a notion that, in some respects, it would be interesting to apply to the contemporary metaphilosophical debate.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> Sellars attributes to Russell a crucial mediating role, both in terms of his analytical interpretation of Leibniz (Russell, 1900) and his reflection on particulars and proper names (Russell 1910; 1911; 1940). He can thus be seen as the *trait-d’union* between Leibniz’s two lines of inquiry discussed here.

<sup>2</sup> The first references to Leibniz can be found in his MA thesis in Buffalo (*Substance, Change and Event*, 1934), in which he read Leibniz through the lens of Russell’s interpretation. There are some lecture notes too, presumably written by Sellars at Oxford (1934-1936), while attending a course on Leibniz held by J.L. Austin (“*Austin – Leibniz*”, undated, in Wilfrid S. Sellars Papers, 1899-1990, ASP.1991.01, Archives of Scientific Philosophy, Special Collections Department, University of Pittsburgh, Box 7, Folder 23).

<sup>3</sup> Sure enough, the principle of reason refers to the idea that the whole series of episodes is grounded in something that is not episodic but self-subsistent: God.

<sup>4</sup> In his essay on Berkeley and Descartes (BD, 363), Sellars traces such a distinction by referring to the Appendix of the second set of *Objections and Replies* to Descartes's *Meditations on First Philosophy*. The distinction also has an important role in SM 31. A careful analysis focused on the subtle, yet decisive, distinctions among the Cartesian's notions of "formal reality", "objective reality" and "material falsity" of ideas is developed in Moran (2014), pp. 67-92.

<sup>5</sup> "There is no motion when there is no change that can be observed. And where there is no change that can be observed, there is no change at all" (Leibniz 1989, 340). This quotation was not produced by Sellars himself: I report it here for the sake of clarity.

<sup>6</sup> "So it is obvious that unless there were change in simple things, there would be no change in things at all. Indeed, not even change can come from without, since, on the contrary, an internal tendency to change is essential to finite substance, and change could not arise naturally in monads in any other way" (Leibniz 1989, 177). Here again, I refer to quotations that might help to clarify the metaphysical meaning of Leibniz's nominalism. For more historical details, and to see how Leibniz managed to combine idealism, nominalism and phenomenalism, see Adams (1994).

<sup>7</sup> On the different models of Leibniz's conception of "nestedness", see Nachtomy (2006), 225-226.

<sup>8</sup> "There is a continuum of *beyondness* which corresponds to the continuum of mediacy of representing". Sellars plays here with the "direction" of spatial continuity and the continuity of the "indirectness" of the representation. It is perfectly clear, he adds, "that you can map a spatial continuum (supposing that there is such a thing) into a continuum of indirectness of representation": Leibniz gives us "a metaphysical model for geometry" (KPT, 256).

<sup>9</sup> The idea that there might be something *actual* corresponding to the representation of  $S_1$  pertains to the nature of divine decrees, since it refers to God's decision to create both terms. Some scholars have rightly pointed out that "analytically deriving the existence of other individuals or external objects from the concept of perception is totally misleading". What we can say is that "the perceptual nature of all substantial states brings it about that a certain series of *internal* (we would say 'intentional') objects is part

of the individual's essence". Paris's love for Helen "does not properly end with Helen, to be sure, hence it does not necessarily imply Helen's existence in flesh and blood 'out there in the world'; it is directed, however, towards a certain representational object" (Di Bella 2005, 345-346).

<sup>10</sup> An interesting question is whether it was Leibniz who influenced Sellars on this topic or, vice versa, whether Sellars's theoretical tools allowed him to interpret Leibniz in this way.

<sup>11</sup> For the distinction between *rules of criticism (ought-to-be)* and *rules of action (ought-to-do)*, see LTC, 507-508; DeVries (2005) 43-46; O'Shea (2007), 79-83.

<sup>12</sup> According to Sellars, in Early Modern epistemology (Kant included) we find no clear-cut distinction between representation as a "representing act" and representation as a "represented object" (KTE 269; KPT 27; SM 36).

<sup>13</sup> The idea that the act-content model is a false relational model, and that this kind of model provides the conceptual key to understanding the epistemology of modern thought, was developed by Sellars right at the start of his lectures on Kant (KPT, 8-9).

<sup>14</sup> According to Henry Allison, "the defining characteristic of transcendental realism is its confusion of appearances, or 'mere representations', with things in themselves". It was only Kant's critical philosophy that succeeded in clarifying this distinction (Allison 2004, 22-23).

<sup>15</sup> The argument is also developed in KTE, 269.

<sup>16</sup> "The core of Kant's epistemological turn is the claim that the distinction between epistemic and ontological categories is an illusion. All so-called ontological categories are in fact epistemic" (KTE, 270).

<sup>17</sup> According to Kant, cognitive content can exist only as represented, or as representable, not in an absolute sense - as a pure realist would have it.

<sup>18</sup> Here the quotation resembles Wittgenstein's *Philosophical Investigations* § 265. As Sellars points out in KTE, "Kant's agnosticism, however, if taken seriously - i.e., construed as the view that we have no determinate concepts of how things are in themselves - means that no conceptual response can be evaluated, in the above manner, as correct or incorrect. Rules of the form «(*Ceteris paribus*) one ought to



respond to  $\Phi$  items with conceptual acts of kind C» could never be rules in accordance with which people criticize conceptual responses; for, in his official view, the *esse* of any item to which any empirical predicate applies is already *to be a conceptual response*, not something that is responded to” (KTE, 282). For an analysis of what is involved here for Sellars’s idea of Kant, see O’Shea 2007, 134-136.

<sup>19</sup> Piro (2005) remarks that every event is the bearer of a not-actuated bundle of possibilities. Each event becomes “actual” precisely by virtue of this bundle of not-actuated possibilities. See Piro (2005), 540-542.

<sup>20</sup> Interestingly enough, the conclusion was rather different and, to my mind, less radical in an earlier version of the paper. Here, in fact, Sellars concluded his analysis by saying: “If, then, our promissory note – which can be abbreviated, with proper precautions into the claim that facts are true statements, and categories of fact, categories of true statement – if our promissory note can be cashed, our discussion will have achieved two purposes: (1) It will have exhibited the basic role which an unformulated *in re* conception of truths or facts played in rationalistic thinking; (2) It will have served to indicate the radical character of the measures which must be taken if the many important insights contained in rationalistic systems are to be translated into contemporary terms.” (*Leibnitz Rationalism: Scaffolding for a Reconstruction (Part I)*), undated, in Wilfrid S. Sellars Papers, 1899-1990, ASP.1991.01, Archives of Scientific Philosophy, Special Collections Department, University of Pittsburgh, Box 33, Folder 9, 17)

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