

24.201 Topics in History of Philosophy: KANT

The Path to Kantian Humility

1. Introduction. In this lecture we'll take a look at how Kant's views about the metaphysics of relations evolved as a response to Leibniz. We begin by recalling from last time the three Kantian theses, and a question:

Three theses

I. Distinction: Things in themselves are substances with intrinsic properties. Phenomena are relational properties. Phenomenal 'substance' does not deserve the name 'substance'.

II. Receptivity: Knowledge depends on receptive sensibility: we can know a thing only in so far as it affects us.

III. Humility: We are ignorant of things as they are in themselves: we are ignorant of the intrinsic properties of substances.

Q. Why think Humility follows from Receptivity?

We'll see that Leibniz held a Distinction rather similar to Kant's; but that he would have vehemently opposed Kant's other two theses. This, I suspect, holds the key to answering our question.

2. Four theses from Leibniz:

According to Kant, Leibniz— 'took the appearances for things in themselves' (A264/B320). What are appearances, and things in themselves, for Leibniz? Somewhat similar to what they are for Kant, on the interpretation I suggest; but different in some crucial respects.

I. Distinction: Things in themselves are substances with intrinsic properties. (Leibniz called them *monads*: they are simple, indivisible substances.) Phenomena are relational properties: phenomenal 'substance', i. e. matter, does not deserve the name of substance.

II. Unreceptivity: We can know without being affected. According to Leibniz, we are not affected causally by other substances. Monads are 'windowless'. Nevertheless, we can have knowledge of other substances even though we are not affected by them. How?

III. Ambition: We have knowledge, via phenomena, of things as they are in themselves (mirror thesis). Even though monads don't affect each other, we can have knowledge of the other monadic substances because of a special harmony that God has set up, allowing each monad to 'mirror' or 'express' all the others, so that what is going on in one monad reflects what is going on in the others, like different clocks telling the same time.

So far we have one thesis apparently similar to Kant's, and two opposed. And so far, we have the two philosophers looking pretty similar in their metaphysics, while differing in their epistemology: but now for a new and crucial metaphysical difference.

IV. Reducibility. According to Leibniz, phenomena are reducible to things in themselves; they are nothing over and above things in themselves.

Recall that phenomena are relational, for Leibniz: so this reducibility of phenomena is an aspect of his famous thesis about the reducibility of relations: according to Leibniz, relations, and relational properties, are reducible to intrinsic properties. Indeed it is this thesis about the reducibility of relations that enables Leibniz to claim that we have knowledge, via phenomena, of things in themselves. In short, Ambition follows from Reducibility. Mind mirrors other monads, because mind mirrors phenomenal bodies, which in turn mirror foundational monads.

When Kant says Leibniz 'took the appearances for things in themselves', he means, I think, that Leibniz held the theses I have labeled Ambition, and Reducibility: Leibniz thought we have knowledge of things in themselves, via phenomena, because he took phenomena to be nothing over and above things in themselves.

Here is a hypothesis. If Ambition depends, for Leibniz, on Reducibility, perhaps a rejection of Ambition, for Kant, depends on a rejection of Reducibility. With that in mind, let's turn to one of Kant's early works.

3. *Kant's New Exposition (1755)* (see text below)

Kant argues that if God created substances, with their intrinsic properties, that would not be enough to create their relations. This early argument opposes Leibniz's reducibility thesis, and supplies exactly what we were looking for, on the above hypothesis. Kant holds:

**Irreducibility* Phenomena are not reducible to things in themselves; relations are not reducible to intrinsic properties

Now let's return to the question with which we began.

Q. Why think Humility follows from Receptivity?

A. Because it does, given Receptivity, and Irreducibility.

Bodies don't mirror foundational monads any more. The mirror is broken: phenomenal 'substance' no longer reveals substance as monad.

A. *Some texts from Kant*

[Excerpt from the New Exposition]

1. Substances by their mere existence are unrelated and are obviously not involved in interaction except to the extent that they are maintained by the common principle of their existence, namely, the divine intellect... *Demonstration*. Single substances...have a separate existence, i.e. an existence that is certainly intelligible without all the others. Therefore if simply the existence of anything is posited, there is nothing that proves the existence of other substances different from it. Indeed, since relation is a determination that looks toward something else (i.e. it will not be intelligible in a being viewed entirely by itself), the relation...cannot be understood through the existence of the substance as posited in itself. If, therefore, nothing more is added to this existence, there would be no relationship among beings and clearly no mutual involvement (413).

2. [The] mutual connection of substances requires a conceptual plan in the divine intellects's...efficacious representation, a representation which, by the way, is obviously arbitrary on God's part and can therefore be omitted or not omitted at His pleasure (414).

3. It appears to me that I am the first to have furnished completely evident reasons in support of the view that the co-existence of the substances of the universe is not sufficient for establishing a connection among them...[E]ven if, over and above substance A, God created other substances B, D, E, to infinity, their mutual dependence in regard to determinations would not immediately follow from the fact of their given existence (413,4).

4. A substance never has the power through itself to determine others different from itself. Its own intrinsic properties are not adequate, as has been proven. It only has the power in so far as substances are held together in a dynamical nexus through the idea of an infinite being. (415)

5. The determinations of substances look toward each other, i.e. substances that are different from one another act reciprocally...if the external phenomenon of universal action and reaction...is that of mutual approach, it is...Newtonian attraction. (415) *New Exposition (1755)*

6. Whatever is intrinsic to substance, i.e. the substantial itself, is not properly defined by space. The substance itself is the subject of extrinsic properties [forces], and those extrinsic properties are something properly to be sought in space... But besides external presence, i.e. the relational properties of the substance, there are other intrinsic properties, without which the relational properties [forces] would not exist, because there would be no subject in which they inhered. But the intrinsic properties are not in space, precisely because they are intrinsic. *Physical Monadology, 1756*

[This passage from the early *Physical Monadology* helps us see what is going on in a comparable passage in the much later *Critique of Pure Reason*, in the Transcendental Aesthetic:]

7. Everything in our knowledge which belongs to intuition...contains nothing but mere relations, of locations in an intuition (extension), of change of location (motion) and of laws according to which this change is determined (moving forces). What presents itself in this or that location, or, beyond this change of location, what activities occur within the things themselves, is not given through these relations. *Now through mere relations one cannot be acquainted with a thing as it is in itself. We*

may therefore conclude that since external sense gives us nothing but representations of mere relations, this sense can contain in its representation only the relation of an object upon the subject, and not the intrinsic properties that belong to the object as it is in itself. (B67)

[Kant's interpretation of Leibniz: note that Kant is maintaining the argument about Irreducibility, now in the context of the *Critique*]

8. Leibniz's monadology has its sole basis in the distinction between the intrinsic and the extrinsic, which he presented purely in relation to the understanding. Substances in general must have some intrinsic nature, which is therefore free from all external relations, and therefore also from composition... But what is intrinsic to the state of a substance cannot consist in place, shape, contact, or motion, since these properties are all external relations. We can therefore attribute to substances no intrinsic state except for that which we determine inwardly in our own sense, namely, the state of representations. Thus are the monads completed. They are supposed to serve as the raw material for the whole universe, despite having no active force, except for that consisting in representations (which, strictly speaking, are active only within the monads). That is why [Leibniz's] principle of the possible reciprocal community of substances had to be a pre-established harmony, and not a physical influence. For when everything is merely intrinsic...the state of...one substance cannot stand in any active connection whatsoever with the state of another. (A274/B330)

[Kant's rational reconstruction of Leibniz: note his willingness to identify Leibniz's monads with unknowable things in themselves]

9. The *Critique of Pure Reason* can...be seen as the genuine apology for Leibniz, even against his partisans whose eulogies scarcely do him any honor...many historians of philosophy, with all their intended praise, only attribute mere nonsense. Such historians cannot comprehend the purpose of these philosophers...They are thus incapable of recognizing beyond what the philosophers actually said, what they really meant to say...[Leibniz] did not mean the physical world, but its substrate, the intelligible world, which is unknown to us...[It] is...fairer to [Leibniz], as long as it is reconcilable with his express teachings, to understand him to mean by the simple [monad] the non-sensible, and to us fully unknown ground of the appearance which we name matter...If we cannot interpret Leibniz in this manner, we must reject his claims. (*Kant Eberhard Controversy*, 1790)

B. Some texts from Leibniz

[Passages illustrating Unreceptivity]

1. Monads have no windows, through which anything could enter or depart...an external cause could not influence their interior.

Monadology (1714), Loemker pp. 1044-5

[Passages illustrating Ambition and Reducibility]

2. This mutual connection or accommodation of all created things to each other and of each to all the rest causes each simple substance to have relations which express all the others and consequently to be a perpetual living mirror of the universe...This universal harmony...results in every substance expressing exactly all the others...It is not in the object but in the modification of their knowledge that the monads are limited.

Monadology, Loemker pp. 648-9.

3. One thing expresses another, in my usage, when there is a constant and regular relation between what can be said about one and about the other...Expression is...a genus of which natural perception...and intellectual knowledge are species...Now this expression takes place everywhere, because every substance sympathizes with the others, and receives a proportional change corresponding to the slightest change which occurs in the whole world.

Letter to Arnauld (9 October 1687), Loemker p. 339.

4. One thing is said to express another if it has properties that correspond to the properties of the thing expressed. ...There are various kinds of expression... What is common to all these expressions is that we can pass from a consideration of the properties of the expression to a consideration of the properties expressed.

"What is an Idea?" (1678), Loemker p. 207.

5. Compound beings are in symbolic agreement with the simple. For everything is a plenum, so that all matter is bound together, and every motion in this plenum has some effect on distant bodies in proportion to their distance...As a result every body responds to everything which happens in the universe, so that he who sees all could read in each everything that happens everywhere...But a soul can read within itself only that which it represents distinctly; it cannot all at once develop all that is enfolded within it, for this reaches to infinity. Thus, although each monad represents the whole universe, it represents more distinctly the body which is particularly affected by it...And as this body expresses the whole universe by the connection between all matter in the plenum, the soul also represents the whole universe in representing the body.

6. We don't have to say that matter is Nothing; it suffices to say that it is a phenomenon, like a rainbow, and that it is not a substance but a result of substances. *Note on Berkeley*, Mates p. 199.

7. A relation, since it results from a state of things, never comes into being or disappears unless some change is made in its fundament.

Mates, p. 223; G. Grua (ed.), *Textes inédits*, p. 547.

[Passages illustrating the Distinction]

8. An aggregate of substances is what I call a *substantiatum*, like an army of men, or a flock of birds, and such are all bodies.

Ariew & Garber p.200n, undated essay.

9. I put corporeal forces where I put bodies, namely, among the phenomena, if they are understood as adding something over and above simple substances or their modifications. Letter to de Volder (1704 or 1705), A&G p.182.