Response to Christian Leduc

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If I were to choose a quote from Leibniz to introduce his reflections on and about the imagination, I would pick: “human beings naturally tend (*conantur*) to explain [*explicari*, better translated as exhibit, L.O.] through things that are subject to the imagination those that they cannot imagine” (*De lingua philosophica*, A VI 4 A 890). The sentence conjoins the noun “men” with a *conatus* or a spontaneous tendency not just to imagine, intended classically as making present the absent, such as when, for instance, one represents a circle in the absence of a drawing; the function of imagination is more prominently to *produce* *exhibitions* of things which are non-imaginable. In this text, Leibniz refers explicitly to the use of symbols or characters to present some intellectual meanings in virtue of tropes, like metaphors. Symbols function as a sort of *unfolding* of notions by making sensible something one can grasp only with one’s intellectual power. So, in its density, this claim posits several questions: what are imaginable things and what are non-imaginable things? If there are non-imaginable things, why is there a tendency to explain them through imaginable things? And, if we tend to explicate or exhibit non-imaginable things through imaginable ones, why are they still non-imaginable? What is the explanation or exhibition that Leibniz talks about?

The book is an attempt to answer these questions and unpack Leibniz’s theory of imagination. As Christian Leduc correctly observes in his detailed and generous review, the book’s main hypothesis is that there is a kind of knowledge dependent on the imagination that corresponds to the “imaginable things” mentioned in the quote. There are, however, non-imaginable things and, to distinguish non-imaginable from imaginable things, I use the term ‘concept’ for the former and introduce a term extraneous to Leibniz’s terminology for the latter: ‘types’. This might sound counterintuitive, as there are concepts that I can exhibit in the imagination, like the concept of a wolf. I argue in the book that, this notwithstanding, concepts and types encode different kinds of information that are not always transferable from one format to the other. To this end, I provide textual evidence and arguments to prove that there is a logic of the imagination, to which types are subject, distinct from knowledge resting on a grasp of intellectual truths, and this latter is mandatory for the attaining of conceptual knowledge.

One can ask, as Leduc rightly does, why I need a new term and do not simply attempt to identify a concept, or a distinction made by Leibniz himself. Leduc’s question goes straight to the core of the book’s main hypothesis; therefore, I use these pages to address other, more specific criticisms raised by him. I understand these criticisms as motivators to expound on aspects of Leibniz’s theory of imagination, at least as I intend it, that require more detailed discussion by Leibniz scholars both because of possible divergence in the interpretation, and because of the originality of Leibniz’s thought on the matter at stake.

In justifying the introduction of the term ‘types,’ I use the term as a proxy for what Leibniz often refers to as “distinct perception” or “possibilities inherent in the resemblances” (p. 27). I therefore partially disagree with Leduc in that I did not try to identify a Leibnizian concept; however, this answer is not sufficient. The real issue here is that the distinction between types/concepts further maps into another distinction that, I argue, must be assumed to be cogent within Leibniz’s epistemology: that between clear and distinct *perception*, and clear and distinct *thought* (Chap. II and IV). Clear and distinct perception is knowledge of imaginable things, and clear and distinct thought is knowledge of intellectual things or things that go beyond the senses. They are distinct kinds of knowledge because they are directed towards different things: beings as they exist *in concreto* and are known by perception, and essences, as they are known by reflection *in abstracto* under the guidance of eternal truths. The real issue here is whether, according to Leibniz, perception is a form of directness different in kind from distinct thought. I argue that this is the case. If so, concepts are specific forms of clear and distinct thought that grasp the essences of things, rather than the way they exist. In this understanding, the type ‘wolf’ and the concept WOLF are not the same kind of knowledge because they are directed towards different things, even though WOLF is an empirical concept whose content is partially vouched by our experience with wolves and that can be exhibited in the imagination.

The tenet of this distinction rests on the idea that, as distinct kinds of knowledge, types and concepts are subject to different logics, where logics means different rules of relations among items that must furthermore differ in nature *if* the former are imaginable, while the latter are not. Although relations and things connected by concepts are non-imaginable, they are made *imaginable* insofar as we express them by means of things that are imaginable, like signs or characters, as in definitions, that, though depending on the power of imagination to represent sensible characters, are clear and distinct thoughts, since signs embed connections and distinctions that we grasp because of the intellect.

To argue in this direction, I proceed by first understanding what expression is (Chap. I) and why it depends on the imagination (Chap. II). I further show that there is a degree of knowledge, clear and distinct perception (Chap. III), and that this differs in kind from clear and distinct thought. Therefore, Chap. IV and V articulate those rules governing types, that are distinct from the rules governing concepts (Chap. VI and VII). I address Leduc’s criticisms concerning these chapters before turning to the distinction between types and concepts.

In Chap. I, I focus on the cognitive side of expression and stress that expression must bestow some form of unity, and that it must produce some simplification, in the thing expressed. The unity and simplification of the expression makes the thing expressed available to the mind, allowing therefore for recognizing relations between the parts composing the expression and for data mining, otherwise the thing expressed would remain out of reach and there would be no furthering of knowledge. In this reading, simplicity is a necessary requisite of expression, and Leduc doubts that this is the case. However, all I argue for is that *unity* is a necessary requisite of expression. This, I think, is enough to prove that simplicity of some sort is produced by expressions too, since we can hardly separate the notion of simplicity from unity in Leibniz’s thought. The simplicity implied here is tantamount to the capacity of grasping relations, since considering something ‘at once’ allows one to see it as complex, whereby one can further see the relations that compose it. But Leibniz uses the term “expression” in metaphysics too, as when he says that the body expresses the soul. Leduc notes that I did not address this issue at length. However, in Chap. I.5, I discuss possible ways to extend the cognitive understanding of expression to Leibniz’s metaphysical use of the term expression and argue that one can reconcile the two uses if one understands ‘expression’ in a metaphysical context as an analogical use of the term, referring to medieval theories of univocal, equivocal, and analogical terms. Moreover, even if not explicitly presented as a discussion of that claim, Chap. IV is intended as an explication of how the body expresses the mind and vice versa.

The other critical points raised by Leduc turn on the distinction between types and concepts, since this distinction lacks textual evidence, and, even if we could textually justify it, it is hardly tenable theoretically, since Leibniz’s description of knowledge degrees suggests more permeable borders between the two, something that I myself admit (p. 247), as Leduc recalls.

In several writings, Leibniz distinguishes between knowledge about existence and knowledge about essences. He addresses knowledge of existence as that kind of knowledge concerning beings, i.e., those things individuated by sensible qualities, while essences are individuated by *distinct* qualities. He calls “perceptibility” the cognizer’s capacity to think about existence, and “conceptibility” a cognizer’s capacity to think about essences. Moving from this distinction (p. 21), in the book I investigate knowledge about existence and provide an answer to what it is. Knowledge about existence concerns beings conceived *in concreto*. It deals with recognizing them as of a certain nature (a non-conceptual form of categorization based on similarity), and in anticipating and tracking how they may change physically. Types encode information about a being’s physical states, how they relate and change, governed by spatiotemporal rules. To perceive beings as body, the imagination must perform a groundwork of segmenting precepts into perceptible wholes, i.e., shapes with magnitude having parts that respond to spatiotemporal constraints in the forms of what I call first and second-order coherence, as spelled out in Chap. IV and V. To perform this groundwork, the imagination responds to what Leibniz calls distinct notions of the common sense, since it encloses shapes having magnitude. Leduc asks how distinct notions of the common sense can be types, if for Leibniz they are distinct and can be defined and are therefore intellectually grasped. The issue relies on a different interpretation of what Leibniz says to Sophie-Charlotte: notions of the common sense are sensible and intelligible *à la fois* (A I 25 340). What I understand from Leduc’s criticism is that “together” means that they are grasped *at once* sensibly *and* intellectually, i.e., that there is no expression of notions of the common sense without some involvement of the understanding. In my view, “together” means both by the senses/imagination and the intellect, but not necessarily at once. In this latter reading, we can distinguish the shape of a circle and recognize it as similar to other circles without grasping what a circle is because this requires that the intellect adds something to our imagistic representation of a circle to make it an *exhibition* of that geometrical figure. On my reading of the letter to Sophie Charlotte, Leibniz articulates degrees of knowledge as he did in *Meditations*, adding here a dialectic between sensible, imaginable, and intellectual that allows for explaining how minds can move gradually from a ‘lower’ sensible degree to higher degrees of distinctness. They can do so because there are things that are sensible but also potentially distinct, as minds can re-use them in conceiving to ascend to higher degrees of knowledge. Despite the distance of time, there are systematic reasons to compare the two texts in order to argue for continuity and differences within Leibniz’s theory of cognition and his epistemology.

It is because of the dialectic between sensible, imaginable, and intellectual that I warn in Chap. IX about the risks of understanding the separation in kind between types and concepts as parallel and separate forms of knowledge. Chap. VIII presents an error theory and argues that Leibniz did not think of the matter in this way, since he contends that the two forms compenetrate to the point of confounding things that satisfy the imagination for rationally sound arguments. The claim mentioned by Leduc must not be intended as a revision of my thesis, but rather as a further development. For both historical and systematic reasons, the real burden of the proof is to show that there is a distinction between perception and thought within Leibniz’s epistemology. The book deals first with this issue. Once shown that there is a distinction, the issue becomes understanding interactions between those logics, as Leduc’s remarks about induction reveal: in human minds, induction is not independent of the principles of reason.

The empirical principle I account for in Chap. V is derived from those rules governing the imagination and is motivated by the idea that, if the imagination has its own logic, what sort of inferences can we draw *solely* on this logic? Mere induction does not exhaust what human minds can infer by induction when guided by rational principles, as Leduc rightly observes. I thus agree with him – and I never argued otherwise in the book. On the contrary, the discussion of conceptual acquisition in Chap. VIII is an attempt to show that, even if the acquisition of empirical concepts requires types, types alone are not sufficient to have a concept, since the intellect must add something to what we process empirically and does not simply abstract concepts from empirical data. Discussing the role of innate ideas, Chap. IX is an attempt to argue for the view that, as Leibniz says to Burnett, one must reconcile empiricism à la Locke with an axiomatic theory of truth to develop a consistent theory of knowledge (A I 18 373). This amounts to refuting the axioms that what is learned is not innate, as Leibniz says to Locke, and as I analyse in the closing chapter.

The question about the permeability between the two kinds of knowledge is the most promising, original, and fruitful aspect of Leibniz’s theory of cognition and epistemology, both for re-interpreting Leibniz in relation to successive figures of the Enlightenment (such as Lambert and Kant), and for the contemporary theory of imagination as well. In the book, I simply gesture towards this research camp, since we cannot start any enquiry without a clear understanding that there are two logics, and the imagination has its proper one.

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