Leibniz’s Account of Error

Keya Maitra

Abstract

In the *Discourse on Metaphysics* Leibniz writes, ‘Our perceptions are always true, it is our judgments that come from ourselves that deceive us’ (section 14). Leroy Loemker in his ‘Leibniz’s Doctrine of Ideas’ criticizes this account of error. His main worry can be presented in the form of the following syllogistic argument, which he derives from Leibniz’s doctrine of ideas: (a) There cannot be a false perception; (b) All judgments are perceptions; and therefore (c) There cannot be a false judgment. However, in this paper I argue that Leibniz can distinguish between a perception and a judgment in their semantic aspect. The sense in which a perception turns out to be false (or true) for Leibniz is different from the sense in which a judgment turns out to be false (or true). This is because, while a perception, understood in Leibniz’s terms, lacks truth-conditions, a judgment, in being representational, has such conditions. Thus while a perception remains true always, a judgment can be false. Pointing to the equivocal use of ‘false’ in (a) and (c) above, I conclude that (c) does not follow from (a) and (b).

**Keywords:** Leibniz; error; intentionality; perception; judgment; ideas

In the *Discourse on Metaphysics* Leibniz writes, ‘our perceptions are always true; it is our judgments that come from ourselves, that deceive us’ (section 14). He later (section 23) points out that because of such deception we take a mere appearance, say the highest natural number, to be a being, i.e., real, and in doing so fall into error. Error for Leibniz is a false judgment that takes the appearance of being. Likewise, to commit a mistake is to believe (i.e., to judge as true) that which is false. However, Loemker, in his ‘Leibniz’s Doctrine of Ideas’ (1946), criticizes this apparently convincing account of error. His argument can be presented as follows: our ideas make our perceptions possible and they also determine that all perceptions are true. Moreover, Leibniz also contends that all activities in a monad are either of perception or of apperception. Judging is not an act of apperception, so it has to be an act of perception. In being a perception a judgment is always true. Therefore there could not be any false judgment and likewise there could be no error. It is instructive to note in this regard that unlike other modern rationalists, namely, Descartes...
and Spinoza, whose accounts of error have received considerable attention in the literature, Leibniz's account of error has generated very little interest or discussion. One reason for this could be that most writers share Loemker's worry in some form.

Loemker's criticism of Leibniz's views on error revolves around a charge of inconsistency (p. 239). Leibniz is inconsistent, Loemker charges, since in spite of his claims to the effect that it is in our inattentive judgments that we are liable to commit error, no such explanation of error can be consistent with the metaphysical and epistemological systems that follow from his doctrine of ideas. A proper investigation of this charge of inconsistency would require one to take different aspects of Leibniz's metaphysics and judge their respective consistencies with Leibniz's proposed explanation of error. I don't aim to accomplish that in the short span of this paper. My aim here is to examine the specific argument that Loemker uses to work up to the charge of inconsistency against Leibniz's explanation of error. Loemker's argument can be schematically presented as follows: (a) There cannot be a false perception; (b) All judgments are perceptions; and therefore (c) There cannot be any false judgment. The main point that I want to make is that even if one accepts Loemker's premises, one is not thereby committed to his conclusion. In order to show this, I will refer to the fact that a thing that is true in one sense can nonetheless be false when considered in another sense. I will argue that though a judgment is true in being a perception per se, that is to say, in being an accurate reflection of the world in itself for Leibniz, it can be false in the sense of being taken by a human intellect to represent something which is not the case. Thus, even though all perceptions are true, a judgment can be false. My aim here is to show that (c) need not follow from (a) and (b) above.

This paper has three parts. The first part lays out the problem that Loemker thinks Leibniz's proposed account of error would encounter in the context of Leibniz's metaphysical system as a whole. In the second part I propose my charitable reading of Leibniz's account of judgment, and explain how he may thus allow for error. In the final section, I offer a brief comparison between Leibniz's and Spinoza's accounts of error since such a comparison seems to bring out a few illuminating aspects of Leibniz's account.

I Loemker's Criticism of Leibniz's Theory of Error

Let us start with a brief explanation of what Loemker means by Leibniz's 'doctrine of ideas' and how he thinks it plays a central role in Leibniz's entire system. The only things that are real for Leibniz are individual monads and their attributes. Monads are substances. God creates the existing world, which is one of many possible worlds. All these possible
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worlds reside in God’s understanding as his ideas. Thus, according to Loemker, ideas should be taken as the complete concepts of all things that God has in his understanding which give the essences of all things. Ideas represent the perfect harmony of God’s plan, and as such they are the possibilities of the harmonious order of creation (p. 232). According to Leibniz, ‘The result of each view of the universe, as seen from a certain position, is a substance which expresses the universe in conformity with this view, should God see fit to render his thought [idea] actual and to produce this substance’ (Discourse on Metaphysics, section 9). This expressing is done with the help of different internal states that arise in a monad. These internal states are what Leibniz calls the perceptions (and also appetites) of monads.

Why does Loemker take Leibniz’s doctrine of ideas as central? For the purpose of this paper his reasons could be explained roughly as follows: we have seen that each monad expresses the entire universe with the help of perceptions that arise in it. What makes these perceptions possible? For Leibniz it is the idea or the complete concept that exists in God’s understanding that makes the internal law of a monad possible. The perceptions that arise in a monad are the temporally sequenced unpackings of this law. Moreover, there is perfect harmony among all the different things, and this is made possible by the harmony of ideas. Such harmony of ideas is also reflected in the harmony that exists between different perceptions of a monad. Thus the central role that Loemker takes ideas to play in Leibniz’s system can be exemplified in the following comment of Leibniz: ‘since God’s view [idea] is always true, [and our perceptions are expressions and actualizations of the harmony of ideas that exists in God] our perceptions are always true’ (Discourse on Metaphysics, section 14).

However, though the perceptions that arise in a monad are always true and therefore cannot misrepresent any states of affairs, they may not always ‘represent’ these states of affairs clearly and distinctly. In fact, most of them are confused and incomplete according to Leibniz. Leibniz’s conception of error could consist of the confused and incomplete knowledge which is modifications of the confused thoughts. Error could be located in the confusions, inadequacies or even incompleteness that sometimes accompany our thoughts.

Such confusions, Leibniz contends, can lead to unfounded thinking, to thinking about things that are not real or possible. ‘[E]rror’ thus ‘is venturing into the impossible; it is the use of symbols without reference to reality. It is assuming ideas when we have none’ (Loemker, p. 244). Leibniz gives the example of our attempt to think of the highest natural number. Such knowledge claims are what Leibniz calls chimeras since they are not validated by any idea. In Loemker’s reading, in this sense ‘we err when we take a fragmentary or confused pattern of symbols for an idea, and we do this because of a weakness of memory or attention’ (p. 245)."
However, Loemker argues that Leibniz could not account for unfounded thinking. His reason is: ‘How is it possible for an individual, whose perceptions are first defined as expressions and actualizations of the harmony of ideas, to perceive a pattern of symbols which correspond to no ideas at all?’, since to perceive (or to judge) is to have a perception and being actualizations and expressions of the harmony of ideas, all such perceptions are true (i.e., accurate representations) (p. 245, my italics)? Loemker’s point is that given Leibniz’s ‘doctrine of ideas’ and the resultant epistemology concerning perception, Leibniz could not explain the source of imperfection and limitation that is needed to explain the possibility of error even when understood as confused truth or unfounded thinking. He thinks that the strict intellectual universalism that Leibniz’s doctrine of ideas implies gets in the way of explaining any such imperfection. The main thrust of his claim is that Leibniz cannot avail himself of the distinction between judgment and perception which is needed to explain the imperfection that could be the source of error. My aim in the rest of this paper is to show that there is a way for Leibniz to explain the source of the imperfection required for committing error, that is to say, for having false judgments.

II Leibniz’s Account of Error Again: Perception

I have alluded in the above to the fact that a thing can be true in one sense and be false when taken in another sense. Take, for example, a shirt which has a number of little mirrors stitched on it. These mirrors reflect the world around and such reflections are true. However, I can imagine myself as judging that the rightmost mirror on the shirt is reflecting part of the maple tree in our front yard now. But what it is really reflecting is part of the elm tree. There are various possible reasons for my taking it as reflecting the maple tree: I may not be paying attention, or it may be that I cannot differentiate between maples and elms very well, etc. Whatever the reason, I can say things with or about a particular mirroring (or the mirrored reflection) that are false; but that is not the same as saying that the mirrored reflection itself is false. I am suggesting that something very similar might be the case with Leibniz’s perceptions and judgments. In this regard, it will be pertinent to see how exactly a perception is rendered true in Leibniz’s model.

A contrast between Leibniz’s perceptual model and our ordinary notion of a perceptual model reveals some interesting features of the former. According to our ordinary model, in perceiving the mind remains passive and is ‘caused’ to perceive something from outside. Likewise, our perceptual judgment is made true or false by the presence or absence of its supposed cause in the external world. However, this is not the case with Leibniz’s perceptual model. Monads, Leibniz explains, are ‘windowless’, 66
and thus cannot be influenced from outside. Leibniz writes, ‘there is no other external object [other than God] that touches our soul and immediately excites our perceptions’ (Discourse on Metaphysics, section 28). Also the concept or essence, i.e., the idea of a substance carries all that will ever happen to it and all the thoughts/perceptions that will arise in it, and therefore ‘it is useless to ask regarding the influence of another particular substance upon it’ (Correspondence with Arnauld X, p. 150). Perceptions thus arise in a monad following its own internal law. The appearance of the interaction between the perceptions of different monads, say your calling my name aloud and my hearing your call, is explained with the help of the pre-established harmony that exists between the ideas and thus between all things of the universe. Given this nature of Leibniz’s perceptual model, it is interesting to see what makes the perceptions true. Leibniz writes, ‘an individual mind is ... a kind of world in a mirror or lens, or in a single point of collected visual rays’ (PA, VI, I, 437). The perceptions that arise in an individual monad are true in being mirrored reflections and therefore accurate reflections of the universe.

Two points need to be noted about Leibniz’s remark that perceptions ‘mirror’ the universe. First the analogy of mirroring can be seen to be the same as the analogy of photography. As in a photograph of Mickey the cat, where Mickey gets photographed either nicely or badly but never truly or falsely, in a mirror image of a person, the person gets reflected, nicely or not, perhaps, but never truly or falsely. The point of similarity between, on one hand, perception as Leibniz understands it and, on the other hand, mirroring and photographing, is that they become true in similar fashions. They are true in the sense of ‘true likeness’. These perceptions are true not in the sense of being literally true as opposed to false; they are not made true as a result of the obtaining of their corresponding truth-conditions in the world. Thus in lacking truth-conditions, they also lack propositional contents. This way of reading Leibniz’s notion of perception is not peculiar either. In a recent paper (‘Confused vs. Distinct Perception in Leibniz: Consciousness, Representation and God’s Mind’) Margaret Wilson (1996) suggests that reading perception as lacking ‘internal intensionality’ might be the most accurate way of understanding Leibniz’s notion of perception. This point can also be explained well by using Brentano’s expression of ‘intentionality’. Photographs and other external signs, unlike mental signs, lack intentionality according to Brentano. The same would hold true for Leibniz’s perceptions. They lack ‘an ofness or aboutness’ that would make them either true or false. Perceptions might be about the world for Leibniz, but the point to be noticed here is that this aboutness is not what makes them true. Perceptions arising in a monad are true because they are ‘expressing’ or ‘accurately reflecting’ or ‘mirroring’ the universe according to the monad’s internal law.
The second point about the analogy of mirroring is that this analogy should be understood in a special way when applied to Leibniz’s perceptions. The ordinary understanding of mirroring involves the conception that there is something (most commonly an external thing) that gets mirrored. This, however, does not represent Leibniz’s conception of mirroring, since perceptions of a monad are not ‘caused’ by any other thing. Moreover, a mirror image is usually taken to bear a resemblance or similarity to its origin. For example, the mirror image of Mickey the cat resembles him. This kind of resemblance or similarity need not be what Leibniz has in mind when he says that monads (or their perceptions) mirror the world. This becomes evident once one takes into account his comment that perception is a species of the genus ‘expression’. According to Leibniz, A expresses B when ‘there is a constant and regular relation between’ what can be said of A and of B (Correspondence with Arnauld). Nothing in this definition says that there has to be resemblance between A and B in order for A to express B. Rather, what there can be is some kind of isomorphism. However, the point that I want to make is that be it strict resemblance or isomorphism, what makes a perception true is its structural similarity (likeness in a loose sense) and not its propositional content.

*Judgments*

Traditionally it has been argued that perceptual judgments, unlike perceptions, have propositional contents (and therefore truth-conditions), and it is precisely this fact that explains our committing error in judgments and not in our perceptions. Judgments thus seem to have intentionality, aboutness, that perceptions lack. The main thrust of Loemker’s attack on Leibniz’s theory of error is that Leibniz cannot avail himself of this distinction between judgment and perception. My aim here is to contest this claim.

The ability to judge presupposes intellect. So it is only spirits with the ability to reason that are capable of judging according to Leibniz. In his ‘Letter to Gabriel Wagner on the Value of Logic (1696)’, Leibniz (p. 463) writes that the art of thinking includes the art of judging. Judgment is that ‘habit’ of men which involves ‘analytics’, where propositions are judged.

Leibniz’s proposal about error seems to be in conformity with Descartes’s explanation of error. From the apparent similarity between Leibniz’s and Descartes’s accounts of error (since both contend that it is in our false judgments that we fall into error) one may conclude that they are the same. But it should not be hard to see the differences between their respective accounts of error. Descartes thinks judgment is primarily ‘an act of the will’. For Descartes, as Leibniz comments, when we speak of something with an understanding of what we say, we have an idea of
the thing and judgment consists of affirming (which might be inaccurate in some cases) that the idea is an accurate representation of the thing (‘Critical Thoughts on the General Part of the Principles of Descartes’, p. 387). But for Leibniz, mere understanding does not assure that we have an idea of a thing. We have an idea of a thing only when we understand it well and analyse it sufficiently, thereby being assured of its possibility.

In the Discourse on Metaphysics (section 26) Leibniz identifies the idea with the quality that our soul has of representing to itself some form, essence or concept. This quality, insofar as it expresses some form, essence or concept, is properly called the idea of the thing. How does the soul perform this representation to itself? A general suggestion could be by means of a thought. Moreover, such thought has propositional content insofar as it represents to the soul some form or essence — insofar as it is representational. In this regard we can refer to the distinction that Leibniz draws between true and false ideas.\(^8\) When a particular thought, say a configuration of symbols, arises in the soul, the soul takes it (i.e., judges) that there exists an idea that corresponds to the configuration of symbols. But that may not be the case. The configuration might be constituted of incompatible ideas. Because of inattentiveness or lack of memory, I might put together symbols for ideas which are in reality incompatible. These symbols in themselves don’t fail to be ‘like’ the things, but the soul takes them to stand for something which does not exist or is not possible. It is in my taking them to stand for an idea, that is to say, in my taking them to be representational, that I fall into error. Such a configuration thus obtains the truth-value False for us even though it remains true, i.e., ‘mirrors’ the world truly as perception. A judgment, in a similar fashion, consists of my taking something to be representational. Leibniz writes ‘we make judgments ... because something appears’ (‘Critical Thoughts on the General Part of the Principles of Descartes’, p. 387, my italics). Some of our thoughts contain false ideas (in the sense of being representationally false), and a judgment that ensues from such a thought (itself another thought) could be taken as constituting error. I could be mistaken about a notion which I believe myself to understand but which in reality might be impossible. Also I can mistakenly add one notion with another that is incompatible with it, thus giving rise to different errors.

III Leibniz and Spinoza on Error\(^9\)

Interestingly the puzzle of error seems to stem from a similar source for both Leibniz and Spinoza. In Spinoza it stems from his claim that there can be no false idea since ‘all ideas, in so far as they are related to God, are true’ (Ethics, Part 2, Proposition 32). In Leibniz, as Loemker points out, the puzzle stems from his claim that all perceptions are true and all our judgments, in being perceptions, are also true. In spite of their similar
sources, the respective solutions that Leibniz and Spinoza offer to this puzzle are quite different. While Leibniz contends that error contains real falsity (judgments whose truth-value is False), Spinoza denies any room for such falsity. Error, in his account, is taken to be a kind of ignorance or incomplete knowledge which does not contain any positively mistaken or false content.

The source of the puzzle that forces Spinoza to settle for his apparently counter-intuitive account of error, as Bennett in ‘Spinoza on Error’ (p. 68) brilliantly draws out, lies in the following question: how can something real be false? All ideas in being modes of the infinite attribute of God form a part of the real description of the universe. Given this, the worry seems to be, how can something that is real nonetheless be false? Any such possibility would depend on one’s accommodating a kind of relation of intentionality or ofness that opens the possibility of something being true (or real) in one sense and false in another. However, the two kinds of ofness relation (‘directly of’ and ‘indirectly of’, Bennett, p. 62) that Spinoza’s metaphysics allows him to accept interestingly leave no room for such an intentionality relation.

In order to understand Spinoza’s ‘directly of’ relation, we need first to understand his parallelism. Rejecting mind–body dualism, Spinoza argues that there is only one substance with infinite attributes. Each attribute expresses the essence of this substance from a particular perspective. The two attributes that humans can conceive of are the physical and the mental. In expressing the same substance from two perspectives there is perfect parallelism between these two attributes (Ethics, Part 2, Proposition 7). Every physical process thus has its corresponding mental process or every physical event has its corresponding mental event. Drawing upon this parallelism Spinoza argues that an idea or a mental state in my mind is ‘directly of’ the physical state in my body, or brain, to be more precise, that is parallel to it. That is why an idea can never fail to be of or about its object and thus fail to be true.

However, Spinoza’s ‘directly of’ relation does not capture what we ordinarily have in mind when we talk about our idea’s being of or about its object. Ordinarily ofness or aboutness is taken to be a relation between mental states and the external world that the states represent. Spinoza does make room for such a possibility through his ‘indirectly of’ relation, in which a state in my mind can be about your body by being directly about a physical (brain) state in my body that is caused by your body. Still the original worry remains: how can a state in my mind be indirectly about your body if not caused by your body? Or, how can my mental state be false? The only situation in which this is possible is the case in which a state in my mind is indirectly caused by a past physical state in your body which is now changed but the state in my body (and also the corresponding idea or mental state) has not. But this covers only a
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minuscule range of cases that we would like to call erroneous. Once again what would have served Spinoza’s purpose is an ofness or aboutness relation that can explain how a thing can be true in one sense and false in other, that is, be real as a mental state but be false as a representational content. Now why did Spinoza resist this possibility? Bennett (p. 69) speculates that among other things it is Spinoza’s dislike of counterfactuals that follows from his deterministic metaphysics. However, as I have tried to show in this paper, Leibniz’s system can accommodate a notion of intentionality that allows him to say that though all our perceptions are true, some of our judgments are not.

The above comparison reveals a couple of interesting features about the discussion of error in the modern rationalist tradition. In spite of the perceived view that most of these thinkers focused on the involvement of will in our committing error, both Spinoza and Leibniz realized that a satisfactory account of error would have to involve the notion of intentionality. Second, Loemker’s claim notwithstanding, it is Leibniz’s flexible system that allows him to accommodate this relation of intentionality that seemed impossible to Spinoza because of his restrictive metaphysics.

Conclusion

My project in this paper has been to salvage the distinction between judgment and perception for Leibniz. A pertinent question to raise in this regard is what kind of distinction I am proposing. I am not proposing to show that judgments are ontologically different from perceptions. I am not suggesting that a judgment can exist without being a perception for Leibniz (though of course not all perceptions are judgments). The difference between them, I suggest, consists of their respective semantic or epistemological properties. Thus, without being ontologically different, a judgment can be semantically or even epistemologically different from perception. Such semantic distinction consists of its intentionality. The property of intentionality consists of what the intellect takes a judgment to be a perception of or about, which may be different from what it is really about. In itself (i.e., in being a perception) it always reflects what it is really about. A judgment is a perception, but it is a perception which unlike many other perceptions has intentionality, that is to say, has propositional contents, and it is in the obtaining of the truth-condition of this propositional content that its truth-value may come apart from its truth-value as a mere perception. In this scenario, there is neither contradiction nor inconsistency.

College of Staten Island,
City University of New York, USA

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Notes

1 An earlier version of this paper was presented at the American Philosophical Association, Eastern Division Meeting in Washington, DC on 30 December 1999. Jan Cover was the commentator and Aaron Garrett chaired the session. I am indebted to them and to other members of the audience for helpful suggestions. I have also benefited greatly from discussing the ideas presented here with Donald Baxter, Mark Kulstad, John Troyer and Elise Springer.

2 It should be noted here that Loemker does not present his argument in this schematic fashion.

3 An anonymous referee has suggested a possible alternative strategy for Leibniz which blocks Loemker’s syllogistic argument by rejecting premise (b), namely, ‘All judgments are perceptions.’ Since premise (b) relies on the assumption that all activities in a monad are either of perception or of apperception, a theme developed in a later period of Leibniz’s philosophy, this strategy argues, Leibniz’s account of error developed in his middle period of the Discourse on Metaphysics need not be committed to this. Now while I agree that the viability of interpreting ideas developed in Leibniz’s middle period in the light of his later theory of monads needs to be examined carefully, this strategy does not seem to address the puzzle at hand very well. First of all, if it is argued that in his middle period Leibniz treats judgments as ontologically different from perceptions, then one would like to know what such a difference would consist of. However, Leibniz does not offer any account of such a difference. Second, since I am interested in an account of error that can be defended even in the later period of Leibniz’s system, this strategy does not seem particularly useful either. This is because in restricting itself to the middle period, this strategy fails to account for how Leibniz would explain error in his later theory of monads. Further, as Leibniz does not indicate (to my knowledge) any change in his treatment of error from the middle period of the Discourse on Metaphysics, it seems that he would like his theory to be valid even in his later period.

4 It is, as we will shortly see, in this sense that Leibniz thinks we end up with false ideas, that is, ideas whose possibility is not proved.

5 God can influence a monad in the sense that the very idea of a monad and its actualization depend on God’s understanding and his decrees respectively. This, however, is not an occasionalist position like Malebranche’s since for Leibniz we do not think through God’s ideas.

6 One may point to our usages like ‘This is a true picture/photograph of Bill Clinton.’ This way of speaking, which is figurative, does not pose a counterexample to the point that I am making here. A photograph can never be false in the way in which my statement that it is raining outside can be made false by the way the world is.

7 ‘... The will simply consists in our ability to do or not do something (that is, to affirm or deny [to judge or not to judge]’ (Meditation IV, 57).

8 ‘It may be appropriate to observe that the improper use of ideas gives rise to several errors. For when we reason about something, we imagine ourselves to have the idea of that thing.... But since we often think of impossible chimeras – for example, of the highest degree of speed, of the greatest number, of the intersection of the conchoid with its base or rule – this reasoning is insufficient. It is therefore in this sense that we can say that there are true and false ideas, depending upon whether the thing in question is possible or not. And it is only when we are certain of its possibility that we can boast
of having an idea of the thing' (Discourse on Metaphysics, section 23). A very similar thought can be found in Correspondence with Arnauld X.

9 I would like to thank an anonymous referee for suggesting that this section be added.

Works Cited


