

## Idealism and Well-Founded Phenomena in Leibniz

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*Leibniz maintained that the most real created entities are simple substances called monads, which according to Leibniz are minds or mind-like things. Furthermore, on a common reading of Leibniz, everything in the universe that is not a monad belongs to some inferior level of reality. One of the most important such inferior levels is that of phenomena, which, for Leibniz, are the representational contents of perceptions. This much is uncontroversial. However, an issue in Leibniz's philosophy which has received relatively little direct attention concerns the nature of what he calls "well-founded phenomena." More specifically, very few commentators have discussed what exactly the property of "well-foundedness" might entail. In this paper, I advance a reading of well-foundedness that takes it to be based on what Leibniz calls coherence. In so doing, I argue against an alternative account of well-foundedness that has occasionally been defended by interpreters of Leibniz, according to whom well-foundedness is simply equivalent to the property of representing a real thing.*

### 1. Introduction

Leibniz is commonly understood to have arrived at a type of "phenomenalism" by the end of his philosophical career, of which the best summation may be his assertion that "there is nothing in the world except simple substances, and, in them, perception and appetite."<sup>109</sup> The simple substances referred to in this passage are, of course, Leibniz's monads. In addition to being simple substances, Leibniz considers monads to be minds or mind-like things, as is clear from

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<sup>109</sup> Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz and Leroy Loemker, *Philosophical Papers and Letters*, 2 vols (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1956), 1:537.

his remark that “whether these principles of action and of perception are then to be called *forms*, *entelechies*, *souls* or *minds*... things will not be changed in any way.”<sup>110</sup> Leibniz’s phenomenalism, as generally understood, thus amounts to the doctrine that the most real created entities are minds or mind-like simple substances that contain perceptions and appetitions and that everything else in the universe belongs to some inferior level of reality. One of the most important inferior levels of reality in Leibniz’s system is *phenomena*, a fact which is prefigured in the label “phenomenalism.” Indeed, the centrality of phenomena to Leibniz’s system is evident from his claim that “in the end, everything reduces to these unities [monads], the rest or the results being nothing but well-founded phenomena.”<sup>111</sup>

For Leibniz, phenomena are the representational contents of perceptions, and these contents are deemed metaphysically inferior to substances due to Leibniz’s acceptance of the Scholastic maxim that unity and reality are mutually interchangeable properties. As Leibniz puts it, “What is not truly *one* being is not truly one *being* either.”<sup>112</sup> For Leibniz, phenomena are unified only in minds and therefore *exist* only in minds. Leibniz’s favorite way of illustrating this idea is the rainbow; strictly speaking, a rainbow is a mental representation of a collection of water droplets, which have unity as a single continuous being only when represented as a phenomenon in a mind. And since unity and reality are interchangeable, the rainbow only *exists*

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<sup>110</sup> Glenn Hartz, *Leibniz’s Final System: Monads, Matter, and Animals* (London: Routledge, 2007), 172.

<sup>111</sup> Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz, *Philosophical Essays*, trans. Roger Ariew and Daniel Garber (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1989), 147.

<sup>112</sup> Leibniz, *Philosophical Essays*, 86.

in the mind in which it is represented. As Leibniz puts it, “a thing which is aggregated from many things is not one except mentally, and has no reality except that which is borrowed from its constituents.”<sup>113</sup>

Although “phenomenalist” readings of Leibniz are common, an issue that has typically been neglected by commentators concerns the qualifier “well-founded” that Leibniz often attaches to the term “phenomenon.” In fact, very few interpreters of Leibniz have directly addressed the question of what exactly the property of “well-foundedness” might involve. This reticence may be an effect of the fact that Leibniz himself, though he frequently invokes well-founded phenomena, says comparatively little about the property of well-foundedness per se. Moreover, when Leibniz does address this subject, his comments are frequently somewhat elliptical. The goal of this paper is thus to offer a reading of Leibniz’s understanding of well-foundedness, in order to determine what he considers to be fundamental to this property. In so doing, I will argue that the few commentators who have made pronouncements on this issue have tended to ignore the condition that Leibniz himself treats as most important to well-foundedness.

From this point on, I will refer to phenomena that lack the property of well-foundedness as “poorly-founded” for convenience, though this is not Leibniz’s preferred term.

## **2. The Representational Success Reading**

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<sup>113</sup> Donald Rutherford, “Leibniz’s ‘Analysis of Multitude and Phenomena into Unities and Reality,’” *Journal of the History of Philosophy* 28, no. 4 (1990): 537.

Although well-foundedness has attracted relatively little attention, some scholars have put forward claims about it. Donald Rutherford, for instance, has argued that well-foundedness is the property of representing a real object. According to Rutherford, this is the only way to make sense of Leibniz's claim that bodies are aggregates of monads.

An analysis of the content of corporeal phenomena reveals them to be perceptions of other monads... Only in this case, I would argue, is the notion of body as a "well-founded" phenomenon analyzed in such a way as to make sense of Leibniz's abiding commitment to the thesis that bodies are aggregates of monads.<sup>114</sup>

In brief, Rutherford argues that the only intelligible way to understand Leibniz's claims that extended bodies are aggregates of unextended monads is to read him as claiming that the extendedness of bodies is an illusion built out of minds' confused perceptions of collections of unextended monads, in much the same way that a rainbow is a mental interpretation of a collection of water droplets. In this sense alone, Rutherford claims, are bodies "aggregates" of monads. Rutherford further thinks that this reading necessitates the conclusion that the well-foundedness of phenomena just *is* the property of being a representation of real things, namely, monads.

Similarly, Shane Duarte has claimed that "it seems clear that Leibniz understands a well-founded phenomenon to be the representational content of a perception that has an extra-mental object."<sup>115</sup> Duarte, however, arrives at this conclusion because he understands

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<sup>114</sup> Donald Rutherford, "Phenomenalism and the Reality of Body in Leibniz's Later Philosophy," *Studia Leibnitiana* 22, no. 1 (1990): 27.

<sup>115</sup> Shane Duarte, "The Ontological Status of Bodies in Leibniz (Part I)," *Studia Leibnitiana* 47, no. 2 (2015): 148.

Leibniz to consistently employ the Scholastic distinction between a thing's extra-mental existence (existence *a parte rei*) and its existence as a mental representation (existence *quoad nos*). According to Duarte, a phenomenon is well-founded when its existence *quoad nos* is grounded in the existence *a parte rei* of some real entity.

From this point on, I will call this the *representational success* reading, since Duarte and Rutherford both maintain that the property of well-foundedness is equivalent to the property of successfully representing a really existing thing. I will argue, however, that Leibniz himself identifies an entirely different condition as fundamental to well-foundedness. One might circumscribe this overlooked condition within the label "coherence." In a later section, I will give a more detailed response to Duarte and Rutherford's respective versions of the representational success reading, but before doing so, I will put forward my own understanding of well-foundedness that, I contend, comports more readily with Leibniz's comments on the topic.

### **3. Coherence and Metaphysico-Mathematical Agreement**

Leibniz's most revealing statement on the issue of well-foundedness may lie in a letter to

Giambattista Tolomei:

Extension, and in it bulk or impenetrability... are in fact, I hold along with many ancient thinkers, only well-founded phenomena: certainly not phenomena that deceive but phenomena that have nothing else objectively real except that by which we distinguish dreams from waking, which is to say, the metaphysico-mathematical agreement among themselves of all those things which souls or entelechies perceive, whether you compare

these phenomena with themselves in the same entelechy or compare them with the phenomena of other entelechies.<sup>116</sup>

In this passage, Leibniz makes several noteworthy claims:

1. There is nothing to distinguish well-founded phenomena from poorly-founded phenomena except that by which dreams are distinguished from wakeful states.
2. This distinction is made by means of a “metaphysico-mathematical agreement” possessed by well-founded phenomena.
3. The metaphysico-mathematical agreement that distinguishes well-founded from poorly-founded phenomena can be observed both in individual phenomena and through the comparison of multiple phenomena.

Despite its apparent centrality to Leibniz’s understanding of well-foundedness, the meaning of the phrase “metaphysico-mathematical agreement” is somewhat opaque. However, valuable insight into what Leibniz might intend here can be gleaned from his much earlier treatise, “On the Method of Distinguishing Real from Imaginary Phenomena” (MRI). Although in this text Leibniz speaks of “real phenomena” and “imaginary phenomena,” I will assume that the distinction between real and imaginary phenomena is simply an early version of the distinction between well-founded and poorly-founded phenomena, and that the terms involved are more-or-less synonymous. Commentators on Leibniz have generally been willing to permit this exegetical move in light of the prominent similarities between the language of MRI and that of

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<sup>116</sup> Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz, “Leibniz to Giambattista Tolomei,” trans. Donald Rutherford, 2014, <https://dss-sites.ucsd.edu/drutherford/Leibniz/translations/TolomeiG.pdf>.

Leibniz's later writings on well-founded phenomena. For instance, as I will soon show, Leibniz treats *dreams* as paradigmatic examples of both imaginary phenomena and poorly-founded phenomena.

Importantly in MRI, Leibniz describes a number of criteria by which phenomena can be determined to be well-founded. These criteria encompass both considerations of a phenomenon's internal properties and comparisons of multiple phenomena, echoing Leibniz's claim to Tolomei. Leibniz names three strictly internal criteria: vivacity, complexity, and coherence. The first two criteria are fairly simple in scope: "[A phenomenon] will be vivid if its qualities... appear intense enough. It will be complex if these qualities are varied and support our undertaking many experiments and new observations."<sup>117</sup> The idea here is that a phenomenon's qualities must be well-defined and varied enough for that phenomenon to be meaningfully investigated; if a phenomenon is too vague, hazy, or simple to lend itself to experimentation, then it is not well-founded. In comparison to this, the criterion of coherence is far more involved. Leibniz writes that a phenomenon will be coherent

If it conforms to the customary nature of other phenomena which have repeatedly occurred to us, so that its parts have the same position, order, and outcome in relation to the phenomenon which similar phenomena have had. Otherwise phenomena will be suspect, for, if we were to see men moving through the air astride the hippogryphs of Ariostus, it would, I believe, make us uncertain whether we were dreaming or awake.<sup>118</sup>

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<sup>117</sup> Leibniz and Loemker, *Philosophical Papers and Letters*, 2:603.

<sup>118</sup> Leibniz and Loemker, *Philosophical Papers and Letters*, 2:603–4.

This is Leibniz's understanding of the *internal coherence* of a phenomenon. That is, a phenomenon is internally coherent if it resembles (in position, order, and outcome) other, similar phenomena that a substance has previously encountered. Thus, the sight of men riding hippogryphs is internally incoherent because it bears no such resemblance to anything the perceiving substance has hitherto experienced. Of course, in a certain sense, this criterion involves a sort of comparison between the phenomenon in question and the entire ensemble of phenomena that a substance has previously encountered. However, the important point here is that, when this criterion is employed, phenomena are evaluated on the basis of the *resemblance* of their strictly internal properties to those of other phenomena. Conversely, Leibniz also thinks that the criterion of coherence can be evaluated on the basis of a phenomenon's *causal* relations to other phenomena. I will call this the criterion of *external coherence*.

This criterion can be referred back to another general class of tests drawn from preceding phenomena. The present phenomenon must be coherent with these if, namely, it preserves the same consistency or if a reason can be supplied for it from preceding phenomena or if all together are coherent with the same hypothesis.<sup>119</sup>

The criterion of external coherence adverts to a phenomenon's causal continuity with the phenomena preceding it; if a phenomenon appears "out of the blue," with no discernible connection to the phenomenon preceding it, then it is externally incoherent. This criterion also applies in the opposite temporal direction, to the *predictivity* of a phenomenon with respect to future phenomena. In fact, Leibniz suggests that predictivity is the "most powerful" of all criteria

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<sup>119</sup> Leibniz and Loemker, *Philosophical Papers and Letters*, 2:604.

hitherto listed: “Yet the most powerful criterion of the reality of phenomena, sufficient even by itself, is success in predicting future phenomena from past and present ones.”<sup>120</sup> Leibniz thus gives his reader a useful set of criteria by which well-foundedness can be ascertained:

- 1) Vivacity: A phenomenon’s qualities must be sufficiently intense to be investigated via experimentation.
- 2) Complexity: A phenomenon must contain sufficient detail to be investigated via experimentation.
- 3) Internal coherence: A phenomenon must resemble other phenomena that a mind has previously encountered.
- 4) External coherence: A phenomenon must be causally continuous with past phenomena and predictive of future phenomena.

In addition to these four criteria, a fifth can be surmised from Leibniz’s other writings, though it does not appear overtly in MRI. I will call this criterion 5) *inter-subjective coherence*.

God could give to each substance its own phenomena independent of those others, but in this way he would have made as many worlds without connection, so to speak, as there are substances, almost as when we say that, when we dream, we are in a world apart and that we enter into the common world when we wake up.<sup>121</sup>

Simply put, this fifth criterion requires that the well-founded phenomena of a certain substance be harmonious with the phenomena of every other substance that exists in the same world. If one of the phenomena in a substance, x, were to contradict the phenomena of the other substances in

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<sup>120</sup> Leibniz and Loemker, *Philosophical Papers and Letters*, 2:604.

<sup>121</sup> Leibniz and Loemker, *Philosophical Papers and Letters*, 2:802.

x's world then that phenomenon would not be well-founded. For instance, if x dreams that it perceives a green sky, the phenomenal content of this perception would be disharmonious with the contents of the perceptions of all the other substances in x's world, who perceive the sky as blue. Thus, whereas criterion 4 has to do with the causal consistency of the past, present, and future phenomena of a *single* substance, criterion 5 concerns the comparative harmoniousness of the phenomena of *multiple* substances.

These five criteria for well-foundedness help to clarify what Leibniz might have in mind when he speaks of “metaphysico-mathematical agreement.” While criteria 1–3 concern the internal properties of individual phenomena, and thus do not pertain directly to any sort of “agreement” between phenomena, criteria 4 and 5 do advert to such agreement; criterion 4 involves the continuity/predictivity of different phenomena within one substance, and criterion 5 involves the inter-subjective harmony of phenomena across multiple substances. Importantly, in certain texts, Leibniz suggests that the agreement emphasized in these latter criteria can be understood as obedience to the rules of mathematics. For instance, he writes, “Although mathematical meditations are ideal, this does not diminish their utility, for actual things do not depart from mathematical rules. Indeed, one can say that in this consists the reality of phenomena, which distinguishes them from dreams.”<sup>122</sup> It would thus appear that the

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<sup>122</sup> Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz and Carl Immanuel Gerhardt, *Die Philosophischen Schriften von Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz*, 7 vols. (Berlin: Weidmann, 1875), 4:569. My translation. The original reads: “*Quoique les méditations Mathématiques soient idéales, cela ne diminue rien de leur utilité, parce que les choses actuelles ne sauraient s’écarter de leurs règles; et on peut dire en effet, que c’est en cela que consiste la réalité des phénomènes, qui les distingue des songes.*”

“metaphysico-mathematical agreement” that Leibniz invoked in his letter to Tolomei refers to those coherence criteria that involve the obedience of *metaphysical* entities (phenomena) to *mathematical* rules. This applies especially to criterion 5, for it seems that, according to Leibniz, obedience to a common set of rules is partially what ensures that the phenomena of various substances will harmonize with one another.

#### 4. Response to Rutherford and Duarte

An important upshot of Leibniz’s reflections in MRI is the fact that *none* of the criteria for well-foundedness given in the text require that a well-founded phenomenon be representationally successful. On the contrary, Leibniz states that “even if this whole life were said to be only a dream, and the visible world only a phantasm, I should call this dream or this phantasm real enough if we were never deceived by it when we make good use of reason.”<sup>123</sup> Of course, Leibniz does not suggest in this passage that the phenomenal world *is in fact* a mere phantasm, but only that he cannot at present be certain that it is not. However, it is at least clear from this remark that Leibniz would in principle be willing to regard a sufficiently orderly phenomenon as well-founded *even if* it were a phantasm that lacked a real object.

Rutherford’s endorsement of the representational success reading of well-foundedness is a consequence of his efforts to decipher Leibniz’s claims that extended bodies are aggregates of unextended monads. Rutherford thinks that the only way Leibniz can be intelligibly understood on this point is by maintaining that bodies are only aggregates of monads in the sense that they

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<sup>123</sup> Leibniz and Loemker, *Philosophical Papers and Letters*, 2:604.

are mental representations of collections of monads. This, Rutherford contends, suggests that well-foundedness is the result of phenomena being grounded in the reality of the monads they represent.

And yet, as we have seen, Leibniz affirms that he would call a representationally-failed phenomenon well-founded, provided that it met certain coherence conditions. It may very well be the case, as Rutherford argues, that we need a notion of representational success to make sense of bodies being aggregates of monads, but it is a leap to claim, from this, that we should also understand well-foundedness on the basis of this representational success. For my part, I am willing to acknowledge that representational success is probably *sufficient* to make a phenomenon well-founded, but Leibniz's writings indicate that it is not *necessary*. Rather, representational success is simply a means of ensuring that a phenomenon will satisfy the more fundamental criteria of coherence canvassed in the previous section. This is because, for Leibniz, the world itself (and every part of the world) is perfectly harmonious and internally coherent. It thus seems that if a phenomenon succeeds in representing a part of this harmonious world, it will be (a) internally coherent, since the object of its representation is necessarily internally coherent and (b) externally and inter-subjectively coherent with all other phenomena which represent things in the same world, since there are no contradictions between various parts of the world. Nevertheless, Leibniz is emphatic that representational success is not the *only* way of ensuring that a phenomenon will meet these coherence criteria and that certain representationally-failed phenomena could still qualify as well-founded if they manage to be coherent enough. The

question of whether any coherent but representationally-failed phenomena actually exist is, for present purposes, irrelevant.

Of course, Rutherford is well aware of the passages in which Leibniz seemingly endorses a coherence-based reading of well-foundedness. However, Rutherford waves these remarks aside by branding them “ambiguities.”

[Leibniz] maintains both that phenomena are well-founded because they are “in agreement,” and that their foundation is a consequence of each perceiver’s being a “mirror” of a common universe of monads... I would argue that the only way to make sense of these comments is to accept that Leibniz allows a considerable degree of ambiguity in the meanings of key metaphysical terms.<sup>124</sup>

It seems uncontroversial that, wherever possible, historical readings should avoid resolving difficulties simply by appealing to ambiguity in primary texts. I thus view my own account as a way of avoiding this move by treating representational success as a *sufficient*, but not *necessary* condition for well-foundedness.

As with Rutherford, Duarte views the representational success reading as a consequence of a broader interpretation of Leibniz. Unlike Rutherford, however, Duarte emphasizes the Scholastic distinction between existence *a parte rei* and existence *quoad nos*, and maintains that, for Leibniz, phenomena are well-founded when their existence *quoad nos* is grounded in the existence *a parte rei* of their representational objects. I make much the same response to Duarte’s argument as to Rutherford’s, namely, that representational success — and, by the same token,

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<sup>124</sup> Rutherford, “Phenomenalism and the Reality of Body in Leibniz’s Later Philosophy,” 24.

groundedness in the existence *a parte rei* of something in the world—is sufficient but not necessary for well-foundedness.

Of additional interest is Duarte’s use of MRI as a proof text for his version of the representational success reading.

As Leibniz makes plain in his “De modo distinguendi phaenomena realia ab imaginariis,” he understands a real phenomenon to be the representational content of a perception that has an extra-mental object. Indeed, the principal aim of this work is to identify criteria or signs (*indicia*) by which one can distinguish those perceptions which have extra-mental objects from those perceptions which do not.<sup>125</sup>

I disagree with this interpretation of MRI. The aim of the treatise is indeed to identify a set of *indicia* by which real phenomena can be distinguished from imaginary phenomena, but nowhere in the text does Leibniz suggest that he understands this to be a question of which phenomena have extra-mental objects and which do not. In fact, Leibniz is fairly straightforward in stating that he considers the *indicia* identified in MRI to be incapable of demonstrating the existence of extra-mental objects: “By no argument can it be demonstrated absolutely that bodies exist, nor is there anything to prevent certain well-ordered dreams from being the objects of our mind.”<sup>126</sup> It thus seems that, far from vindicating the representational success reading, Leibniz’s comments in MRI actually call it into question.

## 5. Conclusion: Idealism and Pre-Established Harmony

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<sup>125</sup> Duarte, “The Ontological Status of Bodies in Leibniz (Part I),” 148.

<sup>126</sup> Leibniz and Loemker, *Philosophical Papers and Letters*, 2:604–05.

At this point, I have not argued that well-founded phenomena are never representationally successful; I have merely shown that Leibniz does not treat representational success as necessary for well-foundedness. However, throughout Leibniz's writings there is a powerful pull in the direction of the more radical thesis that well-founded phenomena are never representationally successful, and that *all* phenomena are mere dreams differentiated by degrees of coherence. This tendency is evident from many of Leibniz's later writings, wherein he overtly entertains this possibility. For example:

If that substantial bond of monads were absent, then all bodies with all their qualities would be only well-founded phenomena, like a rainbow or an image in a mirror—in a word, continuous dreams that agree perfectly with one another; and in this alone would consist the reality of those phenomena.<sup>127</sup>

This radical thesis is also strongly implied by Leibniz's "windowless" doctrine, which he formulates as follows: "Monads have no windows through which something can enter or leave. Accidents cannot be detached, nor can they go about outside of substances... Thus, neither substance nor accident can enter a monad from without."<sup>128</sup> Perception understood (as in Scholastic Aristotelianism) as consisting of the perceived object impinging on the perceiving substance by imparting an intelligible species to it would be precisely what the windowless doctrine is supposed to prohibit. But if a substance's perceptions are not obtained through interaction with the external world, then the phenomena that constitute the representational

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<sup>127</sup> Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz, *The Leibniz-Des Bosses Correspondence*, trans. Brandon Look and Donald Rutherford (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2007), 227.

<sup>128</sup> Leibniz, *Philosophical Essays*, 214.

contents of these perceptions have no real intercourse with an extra-mental world. In this sense, then, no such phenomena would be representationally successful.

This reading of Leibniz as having gone beyond mere phenomenalism and into full-throated idealism has received its most thorough defense in Robert Adams's *Leibniz: Determinist, Theist, Idealist*. Ultimately, even if one resists the idea that Leibniz fully embraces such idealism, it is undeniable that some of his philosophical commitments incline strongly in that direction. Prominent among these is the fact that, as I have shown above, the property of well-foundedness does not necessarily involve representational success. If this conclusion is accepted, then it is at least possible that for Leibniz all phenomena—including those that are well-founded—are representationally-failed dreams, differentiated by degrees of coherence.

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