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Edited by Dan-Eugen Ratiu and Connell Vaughan

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## Table of Contents

<b>Claire Anscomb</b> <i>Does a Mechanistic Etiology Reduce Artistic Agency?...</i>	1
<b>Emanuele Arielli</b> <i>Aesthetic Opacity</i> .....	15
<b>Zsolt Bátori</b> <i>The Ineffability of Musical Content: Is Verbalisation in Principle Impossible?</i> .....	32
<b>Marta Benenti</b> <i>Expressive Experience and Imagination</i> .....	46
<b>Pía Cordero</b> <i>Towards an Aesthetics of Misalignment. Notes on Husserl's Structural Model of Aesthetic Consciousness</i> .....	73
<b>Koray Değirmenci</b> <i>Photographic Indexicality and Referentiality in the Digital Age</i> .....	89
<b>Stefan Deines</b> <i>On the Plurality of the Arts</i> .....	116
<b>Laura Di Summa-Knoop</b> <i>Aesthetics and Ethics: On the Power of Aesthetic Features</i> .....	128
<b>Benjamin Evans</b> <i>Beginning with Boredom: Jean-Baptiste Du Bos's Approach to the Arts</i> .....	147

<b>Paul Giladi</b> <i>Embodied Meaning and Art as Sense-Making: A Critique of Beiser's Interpretation of the 'End of Art Thesis'</i> .....	160
<b>Lisa Giombini</b> <i>Conserving the Original: Authenticity in Art Restoration</i> .....	183
<b>Moran Godess Riccitelli</b> <i>The Aesthetic Dimension of Moral Faith: On the Connection between Aesthetic Experience and the Moral Proof of God in Immanuel Kant's Third Critique</i> .....	202
<b>Carlo Guareschi</b> <i>Painting and Perception of Nature: Merleau-Ponty's Aesthetical Contribution to the Contemporary Debate on Nature</i> .....	219
<b>Amelia Hruby</b> <i>A Call to Freedom: Schiller's Aesthetic Dimension and the Objectification of Aesthetics</i> .....	234
<b>Xiaoyan Hu</b> <i>The Dialectic of Consciousness and Unconsciousness in Spontaneity of Genius: A Comparison between Classical Chinese Aesthetics and Kantian Ideas</i> .....	246
<b>Einav Katan-Schmid</b> <i>Dancing Metaphors; Creative Thinking within Bodily Movements</i> .....	275
<b>Lev Kreft</b> <i>All About Janez Janša</i> .....	291
<b>Efi Kyprianidou</b> <i>Empathy for the Depicted</i> .....	305
<b>Stefano Marino</b> <i>Ideas Pertaining to a Phenomenological Aesthetics of Fashion and Play : The Contribution of Eugen Fink</i> .....	333
<b>Miloš Miladinov</b> <i>Relation Between Education and Beauty in Plato's Philosophy</i> .....	362
<b>Philip Mills</b> <i>Perspectival Poetics: Poetry After Nietzsche and Wittgenstein</i> .....	375
<b>Alain Patrick Olivier</b> <i>Hegel's Last Lectures on Aesthetics in Berlin 1828/29 and the Contemporary Debates on the End of Art</i> .....	385

<b>Michaela Ott</b>	<i>'Afropolitanism' as an Example of Contemporary Aesthetics</i>	398
<b>Levno Plato</b>	<i>Kant's Ideal of Beauty: as the Symbol of the Morally Good and as a Source of Aesthetic Normativity</i>	412
<b>Carlos Portales</b>	<i>Dissonance and Subjective Dissent in Leibniz's Aesthetics</i>	438
<b>Isabelle Rieusset-Lemarié</b>	<i>Aesthetics as Politics: Kant's Heuristic Insights Beyond Rancière's Ambivalences</i>	453
<b>Matthew Rowe</b>	<i>The Artwork Process and the Theory Spectrum</i>	479
<b>Salvador Rubio Marco</b>	<i>The Cutting Effect: a Contribution to Moderate Contextualism in Aesthetics</i>	500
<b>Marcello Ruta</b>	<i>Horowitz Does Not Repeat Either! Free Improvisation, Repeatability and Normativity</i>	510
<b>Lisa Katharin Schmalzried</b>	<i>"All Grace is Beautiful, but not all that is Beautiful is Grace." A Critical Look at Schiller's View on Human Beauty</i>	533
<b>Judith Siegmund</b>	<i>Purposiveness and Sociality of Artistic Action in the Writings of John Dewey</i>	555
<b>Janne Vanhanen</b>	<i>An Aesthetics of Noise? On the Definition and Experience of Noise in a Musical Context</i>	566
<b>Carlos Vara Sánchez</b>	<i>The Temporality of Aesthetic Entrainment: an Interdisciplinary Approach to Gadamer's Concept of Tarrying</i>	580
<b>Iris Vidmar</b>	<i>A Portrait of the Artist as a Gifted Man: What Lies in the Mind of a Genius?</i>	591
<b>Alberto Voltolini</b>	<i>Contours, Attention and Illusion</i>	615

<b>Weijia Wang</b>	<i>Kant's Mathematical Sublime and Aesthetic Estimation of Extensive Magnitude</i> .....	629
<b>Zhuofei Wang</b>	<i>'Atmosphere' as a Core Concept of Weather Aesthetics</i> .....	654
<b>Franziska Wildt</b>	<i>The Book and its Cover — On the Recognition of Subject and Object in Arthur Danto's Theory of Art and Axel Honneth's Recognition Theory</i> .....	666
<b>Jens Dam Ziska</b>	<i>Pictorial Understanding</i> .....	694

# *Dissonance and Subjective Dissent in Leibniz's Aesthetics*

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ABSTRACT. According to the classical view, beauty is grounded on the universe's objective harmony, defined by the formula of unity in variety. Concurrently, nature's beauty is univocal and independent of subjective judgement. In this presentation I will argue that, although Leibniz's view coincides with this formula, his philosophy offers an explanation for subjective dissent in aesthetic judgements about nature. I will show that the acceptance of divergences on aesthetic value is the result of a conception of harmony that includes dissonance.

## **1. Introduction**

Leibniz's aesthetics fall within the Pythagorean tradition in so far as he agrees that the beauty of the universe is an objective value grounded on the cosmos' harmony. In this view, harmony is a property of systems, defined as unity in variety. According to this tradition, beauty is univocal and indifferent to subjective judgement. In this paper I argue that, despite Leibniz's complete adherence to this formula, his interpretation explains and justifies the subjective dissent in aesthetic judgements. I show that the possibility of valid divergences regarding the aesthetic value of nature is the result of a Leibnizian conception of harmony that includes dissonance.

In the next section (2), I argue that for Leibniz, beauty is an expression of perfection that corresponds to the formula of unity in variety and does not need to be subjectively perceived.

Afterwards (3), I explain the role of dissonance in Leibniz's notion of harmony and beauty. According to Leibniz, the world is beautiful because of the heterogeneity of its constituents. He postulates that, in a

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series of mostly consonant and harmonic elements, dissonances are the best diversifiers, and are required to enhance harmony and beauty. This entails the counterintuitive idea that dissonances maximise harmony by opposing it.

In the last section (4), I argue that Leibniz's concept of aggregates explains the existence of subjective harmonies that run in parallel with the objective harmony of the world. Aggregates are formed when the mind gives unity to a variety of things through an idea. As a result, aggregates comply with the formula of harmony and beauty as unity in variety. Since ideas are subjectively grounded, they enjoy a certain level of freedom regarding the way in which they select the multiple elements they unite.

At this point I argue that dissonances become imperative for there to be diversity in aesthetic judgements. This is the case because the presence of dissonances in the world allows ideas to form aggregates with different combinations of consonant and dissonant elements. As a result, aggregates can resolve dissonances harmonically with different degrees of success, thus generating different aesthetic judgements about nature.

In this sense, I conclude that different, and even contradictory, aesthetic judgements are explained and justified, despite the adherence to an objective notion of beauty.

## **2. Beauty and Unity in Variety**

For the Pythagoreans, the cosmos was created following perfect proportions based on mathematical ratios, which resulted in it being harmonious. Timaeus of Locri reportedly claimed that God created a perfect and beautiful universe, following harmonically combined proportions, to which the mind adjusts and perceives beauty (Navon, 1986, pp.116-118). Harmony was first and most significantly a metaphysical force that ruled the universe. As the Pythagorean Philolaus reportedly described it; '[t]he harmony is generally the result of contraries; for it is the unity of multiplicity, and the agreement of discordances' and dissimilar things 'must be organized by the harmony, if they are to take their place in the connected totality of the world' (Navon, 1986, pp.131-132).

“Unity in multiplicity” is also Leibniz’s definition of harmony and, just like Philolaus, Leibniz thought that harmony was the principle that ruled the universe. Consequently, harmony is an objective value of the cosmos. In an essay entitled *On Wisdom* (1693-1700?), Leibniz states that:

[U]nity in plurality [*Einigkeit in der Vielheit*] is nothing but harmony [*Übereinstimmung*] and, since any particular being agrees with one rather than another being, there flows from this harmony the order from which beauty arises. (GP VII, p.87/L, p.426)<sup>2</sup>

Leibniz’s notion of beauty coincides with the Pythagorean view that beauty is harmony or “unity in plurality”. Different versions of this latter expression, such as “diversity compensated by identity” (A VI 1, p.484) or “agreement in variety” (GW, p.172), are found throughout Leibniz’s works. Although all of these different phrasings have diverse contexts and slightly varied connotations, they all express united variety, which is harmony. Furthermore, this structure also entails perfection, as Leibniz states that, ‘the perfection a thing has is greater, to the extent that there is more agreement in greater variety, whether we observe it or not’ (GW, p.171/AG, p.233). According to this and other textual evidence, Gregory Brown argues that it would not be completely wrong to assume that harmony, beauty and

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<sup>2</sup> I employ the following abbreviations: A = *Sämtliche Schriften und Briefe*, Darmstadt and Berlin: Berlin Academy, 1923-; AG = R. Ariew and D. Garber, trs. & eds., *G. W. Leibniz: Philosophical Essays*, Indianapolis: Hackett, 1989; GP = C. I. Gerhardt, ed., *Die Philosophischen Schriften von Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz*, 7 vols., Berlin: Weidman, 1875-90. Reprint, Hildesheim: Olms, 1965-; Grua = G. Grua, ed., *Leibniz: Textes Inédits*, 2 vols., Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1948 ; GW = C. I. Gerhardt, ed., *Briefwechsel zwischen Leibniz und Christian Wolf*, Halle: H. W. Schmidt, 1860; H = E. M. Huggard, tr., *G. W. Leibniz: Theodicy; Essays on the Goodness of God, the Freedom of Man and the Origin of Evil*, London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1951. Reprint, La Salle, Illinois: Open Court, 1985; L = L. E. Loemker, tr. & ed., *G. W. Leibniz: Philosophical Papers and Letters*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed., Dordrecht: Reidel, 1969; LDV = P. Lodge, ed. & tr., *The Leibniz-De Volder Correspondence: With Selections from the Correspondence Between Leibniz and Johann Bernoulli. The Yale Leibniz*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 2013; M = M. T. Mason, *Correspondence with Arnould*, Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1967; MP = M. Morris & G. H. R Parkinson, *Philosophical Writings*, London: Dent, 1973; RB = P. Remnant and J. Bennett, trs. & eds., *G. W. Leibniz: New Essays on Human Understanding*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981.

perfection are the same thing (Brown, 1988, p.577). It is also worth noting that in the last part of the quote Leibniz adds, 'whether we observe it or not', thus reinforcing the idea that perfection –and hence beauty– does not depend on subjective perception.

For Leibniz, the more united variety there is, the greater the harmony (Grua, p.12), hence the greater the beauty. In this sense, beauty has degrees that are accounted for according to the measure of the two terms, unity and variety. The question is, what are unity and variety? As we will see in the next section, for Leibniz, unity refers to a principle of order. On the other hand, variety is almost always a multiplicity of things, representations or properties.

Leibniz mentions the formal structure of unity in variety, mainly referring to the objective beauty of the world, based on the objective degree of the unity and variety of the most perfect possible world. But how does this notion of objective beauty relate to us? The answer is pleasure. The relation between pleasure and beauty appears in Leibniz's works from his earliest texts. For example, in a text entitled *Resumé of Metaphysics* (1697), Leibniz defines pleasure as: 'An intelligent being's *pleasure* is simply the perception of beauty, order and perfection' (GP VII, p.290/MP, p.146). In the following sentence of the same text, he relates pleasure to completeness and order, explaining that pain, contrary to pleasure, contains something disordered and fragmented. Nevertheless, in reality, all natural things are objectively ordered. Therefore, disorder is 'only relative to the percipient' (ibid). In Leibniz words: 'So when something in the series of things displeases us, that arises from a defect of our understanding. [...] and to those who observe only some parts rather than others, the harmony of the whole cannot appear' (GP VII, p.290/MP, p.147). Thus displeasure is caused by a certain subjective partial appreciation, which does not capture the whole. This is a recurrent theme in Leibniz's writings, often used to describe the problem of evil and dissonances in aesthetics. For example, in his *On the Ultimate Origination of Things* (1697), Leibniz states: 'Look at a very beautiful picture, and cover it up except for some small part. What will it look like but some confused combination of colors, without delight, without art' (GP VII, p.306/AG, p.153). And again in §134 of his *Theodicy*

(1710), he states:

[W]e acknowledge, [...] that God does all the best possible, [...] when we see something entire, some whole complete in itself, and isolated, so to speak, among the works of God. Such a whole, shaped as it were by the hand of God, is a plant, an animal, a man. We cannot wonder enough at the beauty and the contrivance of its structure. But when we see some broken bone, some piece of animal's flesh, some sprig of a plant, there appears to be nothing but confusion. (GP VI, p.188/H, p.207)

The contemplation of whole things is required from us, so they can delight us with their objective beauty, since a partial observation prevents us from grasping things without confusion. As I will explain, it is precisely this failure to grasp the whole that makes room for subjective aesthetic value. Furthermore, it is because the objective variety of the world includes dissonances that we are able to unite partial aspects of the world and create different harmonies with different degrees of aesthetic value.

### **3. Variety and Dissonance**

Although there is an undeniable agreement between Leibniz and the Pythagorean view, there are significant differences that make Leibniz's version diverge from the original one. The most relevant difference is the introduction of dissonances in the context of variety. It is quite common to find some Pythagoreans expressing certain kinds of Manicheism in their cosmology. For example, according to Archytas, harmony was a force aligned with order, reason and consonance, which excluded disorder, irrationality and dissonance (Navon, 1986, p.142). On the contrary, Baroque thinkers, such as Kepler (Pesic, 2005, pa. 3.19), Mersenne (1965, p.131) and Leibniz postulated a universe that includes an infinite number of things, among which a small amount of them seem evil or dissonant.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> This view correlates in many ways with the advances of music theory and practice in the 17<sup>th</sup> century. For example, see Marin Mersenne's *Harmonie Universelle*

I claim that in Leibniz's writings it is possible to distinguish two types of variety. I will call the first one "quantitative variety". This type can be found in definitions of beauty such as the one Leibniz offers in *On Wisdom*, where he states that beauty comes from unity in variety, which takes place when 'the one rules many outside of itself and represents them in itself' (GP VII, p.87/L, p.426). "Many" in this context is an expression of quantitative variety, since it refers to a quantity of things, representations or properties.

On the other hand, there are expressions of a "qualitative variety", which is expressed, for example, in what Leibniz calls the "law of delight" (*laetitiae lex*):

On that same principle it is insipid to always eat sweet things; sharp, acidic, and even bitter tastes should be mixed in to stimulate the palate [...] Pleasure does not derive from uniformity, for uniformity brings forth disgust and makes us dull, not happy: this very principle is a law of delight. (G VII, p.307/AG, p.153)

In this case, variety is not just a quantitative denomination, but also involves a notion of diversity that is qualitative. In other words, variety is a significant difference between two or more qualities, such as bitter and sweet. Qualitative variety can refer to opposing values that disrupt or limit each other and at the same time augment the degree of the overall positive result.

Leibniz often exemplifies this idea with music, more specifically with the figure of dissonance: '[T]he most distinguished masters of composition quite often mix dissonances with consonances in order to arouse the listener [...] so [...] the listener might feel all the more pleasure when order is soon restored' (G VII, p.306/AG, p.153). Indeed, the idea of qualitative variety perhaps finds the most suitable representation in dissonance, since it is a value that is opposed to the very thing that it improves, harmony. For example, Leibniz writes in the *Theodicy* that, '[t]here are some disorders in the parts which wonderfully enhance the

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(1636) (1965, p.121) and Menendez 1999.

beauty of the whole, just as certain dissonances, appropriately used, render harmony more beautiful' (GP VI, p.384/H, p.385).

For Leibniz, dissonance is not just a musical metaphor but a value of the universal harmony that rules the world and grounds its beauty. As is well known, Leibniz claims that the actual world is the most perfect possible world. The highest degree of perfection means the highest degrees of harmony or unity and variety (GW, p.170). However, Leibniz insists that the harmony of the most perfect possible world possesses dissonance as well as evil. Dissonance and evil have the same function in Leibniz's metaphysics; both are negative values that work against the main positive features of the world, i.e. harmony and goodness (G VI, p.384). Leibniz suggests that the inclusion of dissonance and evil is in fact better than their exclusion:

I believe that God did create things in ultimate perfection, though it does not seem so to us considering the parts of the universe. It's a bit like what happens in music and painting, for shadows and dissonances truly enhance the other parts, and the wise author of such works derives such a great benefit for the total perfection of the work from these particular imperfections that it is much better to make a place for them than to attempt to do without them. (Grua, p.365-6/AG, p.115)

Regarding evil, Leibniz explains that 'he [God] can banish evil, but that he does not wish to do so absolutely, and rightly so, because he would then banish good at the same time, and he would banish more good than evil' (G VI, p.435/H, p.441). In this sense, good and evil or consonance and dissonance seem to be inextricably interrelated in order to achieve a greater positive value. In other words, a greater harmony is not without the variety introduced by dissonance. In this sense, our world is not just composed of perfect consonances, but also dissonances that bring about the heterogeneity required by beauty.

Yet this is not enough. For Leibniz, beauty is achieved with the reduction or "redemption" of the apparent and temporal disorder between things. This disorder is brought about by qualitative variety that includes dissonant elements. As he states, harmony 'is greatest in the case where a unity of the greatest number of things disordered in appearance and reduced,

unexpectedly, by some wonderful ratio to the greatest elegance' (A VI, 3, pp.122-123/ CP, pp.43-44). In this sense, harmony –and hence beauty– reaches its peak at the moment when the dissonances are harmonically resolved.<sup>4</sup> The moment when dissonances are suddenly redeemed and order is restored corresponds to the aesthetical supremacy of the whole in Leibniz's philosophy, as described in the previous section. Thus, only the whole exhibits the true beauty of something, since the whole is associated with the moment of the resolution of dissonance and the highest peak of harmony. Hence beauty is not merely quantitative multiplicity or qualitative diversity, but also the resolution of dissonances in certain complete final unity.

#### 4. Unity and Aggregates

Beauty as harmony has been defined with a formula involving two terms: on the one side “unity” and on the other “variety”. This formula is equivalent to several other expressions coined by Leibniz, such as ‘diversity compensated by identity’ [*diversitas identitate compensata*], ‘variety reduced to unity’ [*varietas reducta in unitatem*] (GP I, p.73/ L, p.150), ‘unity in plurality’ [*Einigkeit in der Vielheit*] (GP VIII, p.87/ L, p.426) and ‘agreement or identity in variety’ [*consensus vel identitas in varietate*] (GW, p.172/AG, p.233). However, a careful comparison of these phrases highlights the following issue: Although the terms “variety”, “plurality” and “diversity” refer more or less to the same idea, the terms on the other side of the formula (“unity”, “identity” or “agreement”), are at odds with each other. “Unity” and “identity” are not evidently equivalent to “agreement” in the same way that “multiplicity” and “variety” are equivalent to each other. In this sense, Leibniz's concept of unity cannot be limited to oneness or union, but should also include identity and agreement. In order to embrace all of the significations that unity involves in reference to harmony and beauty, a more general concept is required.

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<sup>4</sup> Later in the same text, Leibniz applies this same principle to art, calling it “the rule of art” (see A VI, 3, p.147/CP, p.103).

I propose that unity must be understood as a principle of order. This is a wide notion that applies to laws, rules or designs, or any other principle that induces order such as organisation, coordination or direction. Principles of order not only produce unities, and constitute identities and the agreement of their internal multiplicities, but also *are* the unity that the postulated formula of harmony/beauty expresses. In Leibniz's ontology, unifying principles of order can be found at any level where it is possible to designate unities: from the set of all possible worlds, through each one of these possible worlds, to any individual that inhabits those worlds. Therefore, harmony's unity interpreted as a principle of order permits the universal extension of beauty to every ontological level.

We can see this notion of unity as a law or rule in the case of the unity of the world and its relation with individuals. For Leibniz, 'each possible individual of any one world contains in the concept of him [the individual] the laws of his world'. As Leibniz states in a letter to Arnauld (14/07/1686):

I will add that I think there is an infinity of possible ways in which to create the world, according to the different designs which God could form, and that each possible world depends on certain principal designs or purposes of God (*desseins principaux ou fins de Dieu*) [...] or certain laws of the general order of this possible universe with which they are in accord and whose concept they determine, as they do also the concepts of all individual substances which must enter into this same universe .(G II, p.51/L, p.333)

Each world has a particular and unique principle of order framed within a more general structure of possible logical combinations. This principle or design defines the particularity of a possible world, as a particular law of order for each world that determines the inclusion of certain individuals and brings them into accord. Therefore, any world should also be understood as a unity, with identity and agreement, because of its design. This design is an objective principle of order or unity, as it is given by God independently of our subjective appreciation.

In contrast to the objective unity of the world, there is another type

of unity: the unity of aggregates. For Leibniz, 'an aggregate is nothing other than all the things from which it results taken together, which clearly have their unity only from a mind, on account of those things that they have in common, like a flock of sheep' (GP II, p.256/LDV, p.275). Although Leibniz never explicitly considers the relation between aggregates and beauty, it is quite clear that aggregates express the same formula of beauty and harmony: unity in variety.

Aggregates are not objective unities, since their unity is found in subjective ideas. However, this unity by aggregation is not radically created by the mind *ex nihilo*. Paul Lodge states that although 'aggregates exist only if a mind exists and apprehends the relation that constitutes the essence of that aggregate', it is still necessary to have 'things standing in those relations' (2001, p.473). Therefore, an aggregate also depends on there being objective substances that can be apprehended as related by the mind, as Leibniz states that, '[t]he unity of the idea of an aggregate is a very genuine one; but fundamentally we have to admit that this unity of collections is merely a respect or a relation, whose foundation lies in what is the case within each of the individual substances taken alone' (RB, p.146).

The foundation of the uniting idea of an aggregate is the set of relations found in the nature of individual substances, which are the idea's constituents. In other words, relations are not mind dependent, since they do have an ontological base in the individual concept of substances.<sup>5</sup> For example in his correspondence with Arnauld, Leibniz states that:

[T]he concept of the individual substances contains all its events and all its denominations, even those that commonly calls extrinsic (that is to say, that belong to it only by virtue of the general connexion of things and of the fact that it is an expression of the entire universe after its own manner), since there must always be some basis for the connexion between the terms of a proposition, and it is to be found in their concepts. (GP II, p.56/M, pp.63-64)

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<sup>5</sup> This is a contested view. On the one hand, some commentators, including Lodge, take relations to be 'not features of the real world' (Lodge, 2001, p.477). On the other, some commentators have argued the opposite. See, for example Hide Ishiguro (1990, p.107) and Nachtomy (2007, p.118). Here I agree with the latter view.

Relations or extrinsic denominations are in the individual substance; they are not a mere product of the mind.

That said, as Lodge puts it, 'aggregates are very cheap', since they come into existence with an extraordinary facility (2001, p.473-4). Yet this is to be expected from Leibniz's harmonically interrelated world, where every individual thing is related to every other (AG, p.100). This allows the mind to discover connections everywhere and, hence to group together individuals almost at will. Following this line of argumentation, aggregates are not just based on relations established by the subject's mind, but rather are the product of a mental process of selection of certain relations –existing in the substance's concept– where the mind includes some and excludes others, following a determinate principle of order such as a criterion given by an idea.

It is exactly this process of selection where the possibility of subjective dissent takes place. As said earlier, beauty is harmony as unity in variety. Regarding variety, the world objectively contains not only consonant elements with consonant relations, but also dissonant ones. Thus the variety offered by the world is objectively heterogeneous. On the other hand, the subjective aspect of aggregates refers only to the capacity to provide a principle of order or rather unity. The mind is quite versatile in providing uniting ideas, so in principle it is possible to unite (include and exclude) almost any relation of elements offered by nature. Yet, this subjective unity must select to unite elements from an objectively given variety that includes contrasting values. For Leibniz, when we are able to observe the objectively united whole –or at least a substantially united part of the whole– we notice that the dissonant elements and relations are finally harmonically resolved. Yet, since aggregates can unite partial chunks of reality, according to subjective criteria of order, it is possible that from the very beautiful picture that is the whole, we unite only 'some confused combination of colors, without delight, without art' (GP VII, p.306/AG, p.153). When this happens an idea is selecting and uniting as one a 'series of things [that] displeases us' since we are observing 'only some parts rather than others', and hence 'the [objectively given] harmony of the whole cannot appear' (GP VII, p.290/MP, p.147).

If nature did not offer qualitatively different values –such as consonances and dissonances– aggregates could only create harmonies with homogenous values, since ideas would find only similar elements to unite. Thus there would be no significant differences between aesthetic judgements. However, the presence of dissonance in the world allows ideas to form aggregates with different degrees of consonant and dissonant elements. Aggregates, as subjectively united series, might be able to resolve dissonances harmonically with different degrees of success, generating different aesthetic judgements about the world or parts of it. For example, some aggregates might include a specific balance between consonant and dissonant elements that fails to resolve dissonances, resulting in a negative aesthetic judgement regarding certain aspects of the world. Others could include mostly consonant elements, lacking in variety, and thus encountering an aesthetically dull nature. In extreme cases, some might find only discordant elements and experience pure displeasure and ugliness.

Furthermore, for Leibniz, these judgements are to be expected from ideas generated by finite minds that only have a limited apprehension of the world. Nonetheless, these cases are still judgements of incomplete series of elements, grounded on ideas that do not reach the unity in variety offered by an objectively beautiful world. These unities show how flexible the unity per aggregation is and that Leibniz's philosophy allows a kind of dynamic unity and hence divergent aesthetic judgements. However, Leibniz's philosophy allows and pretty much promotes the possibility of the encounter between subjective unity and objective unity. The objective unity of the world includes several other objective sub-unities, such as laws of nature and the unity of infinitely many individual and corporeal substances. Hence there are almost an infinite number of objective principles of order cohabitating within the unity of the world. In this sense, it is not uncommon for the mind to grasp or conceive of a unity that coincides with these natural unities. An example of beauty under these circumstances would be the beauty of scientific theories in natural sciences.

Finally, it must be said that this does not mean that beauty is subjective. Beauty is always objective for three reasons. First, the rules with which a unity per aggregation must comply to reach beauty are objective,

i.e. they are in God's understanding (e.g. unity, variety, wholeness, etc.) (A VI 3, pp.122-3). Second, the relations that are united by an idea must be founded on individual substances, i.e.; objective reality. Third, for Leibniz, beauty is a property of the object, since, even if we are able to establish arbitrary unities and hence create "new objects" (even as ideas), these objects have being in the mind of God even before we conceive them. In other words, any conceivable unity already has being in the mind of God.

## 5. Conclusion

As I have tried to show, the given interpretation of Leibniz's philosophy provides an explanation for subjective dissent between aesthetic judgements through his notions of aggregates and dissonances. This is so despite the fact that he upholds the traditional objective position, which states that beauty is unity in variety or harmony.

Although Leibniz did not offer an explicit account of the relation of aggregates and aesthetics, I argued that aggregates respond to the formula of unity in variety and therefore they replicate the structure of beauty. In this context, the harmony of aggregates consists in a subjective idea that unites an objectively given variety according to its own principle of order. In this way aggregates are characterised as harmonies that differ from the objectively given harmonies of nature, since the latter ones have objective unity. Furthermore, aggregates' harmonies not only differ from nature's objective harmonies, but also from each other. The result is subjective dissent among aesthetic judgements.

Yet, in order to explain subjective dissent something else is needed. As I have pointed out, the possibility of subjective dissent is given by a qualitative notion of variety that exhibits dissonances. Nature's beauty is not just the unity of qualitatively different things, but also a union of things with contrasting values that produce dissonance. Nonetheless, for Leibniz, the tension introduced by dissonances in the universe is harmonically resolved in the unity of the whole, resulting in an objectively beautiful world. The same result is achieved in all of the objective unities that compose the

universe.

Nevertheless, in the case of aggregates this can go a different way. Subjective unities cannot always reach this final harmonic resolution of dissonances. Aggregates can be unities of many different combinations of elements. Some unities successfully resolve their dissonant elements, while others not so successfully, or not at all. The result is divergence among subjective judgements.

In this way, Leibniz offers a philosophical view that explains why there are different aesthetic judgements about nature. These different judgements are the consequence of a mismatch between subjective unities and objective natural unities. When this mismatch is too drastic, we might perceive less beauty (or none) than what nature really has to offer. In this cases, subjective aesthetic judgements are characterised as a sort of limitation of our capacity to grasp an objective unity. Yet, for Leibniz, if we succeed in matching our subjective unities with objective ones we should not fail to encounter the full extent of nature's beauty.

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