Research Note

Bourdieu and Leibniz: Mediated Dualisms

Abstract

The research note discusses similarities in theory construction between Bourdieu and Leibniz. Instead of 'overcoming' the Cartesian dualisms, both authors find a way to mediate between the dualistic concepts by introducing a third concept. In Leibniz' case, this is God, in Bourdieu's case, history. Reading Bourdieu thus from a Leibnizian angle, the note seeks to clarify some issues in Bourdieu's theory construction.

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The present research note wants to show linkages and similarities in theory construction between Bourdieu and the 17th century philosopher Leibniz. The aim is to explore to which extent Bourdieu (most explicitly stated in Bourdieu, 1980/1990, Bourdieu and Wacquant, 1996) overcomes the traditional dualisms formed by Cartesian philosophy: subjective-objective, mind-body as well as the subsequently developed dichotomy of structure and agency[1].

Among the many concepts Bourdieu introduces for that purpose, I should like to focus on the special relationship of two: the habitus and the field. The habitus is Bourdieu's major concept to portray how institutions, conventions and other practices influence and shape the individual human being with regard to its body, preferences, attitudes, etc. Through socialisation and biography, the habitus attains a historical dimension. Its *hysteresis* guarantees a certain stability as it retains the habitus malleable but only 'reluctantly" and in a slow process of re-socialisation (Bourdieu and Wacquant, 1996). The field, on the other hand, is the dynamic situation actors live in. The spatial metaphor of the field points to Bourdieu's emphasis on relations and positions. It is shaped by actors' practices, and has also a strong historical dimension in the process of objectification as individual actions become objective conditions. In sum, both the habitus and the field function as 'depositories' for past practices, and both objectify these practices: the habitus in a corporal, the field in a social way. Under conditions of stability, i.e. when the present is like the past, the habitus enables people to 'inhabit' the institutions of the field. Vice versa, to the degree that the present differs from the past, the habitus and the field may develop a conflictual relationship. The remarkable feature in Bourdieu's linking of the habitus and the field is the way these two do *not* interact

directly. The habitus is formed over time and then normally remains stable (cum grano salis) afterwards, and the same can be said of the institutions of the field. If we take a snapshot of an adult person at a certain time, both the habitus and the field are given in a rather static way. Their primary connection is through the past, i.e. a common history that increases the probability of their matching in the present. In the present, to repeat, there can be no ad hoc adjustment, or as Bourdieu puts it:

'The proper object of social sciences, then, is […] the relations between two realizations of historical action, in bodies and in things' (Bourdieu and Wacquant, 1996:126f.).

And later:

'Social reality exists, so to speak, twice, in things and in minds, in fields and in habitus, outside and inside of agents' (Bourdieu and Wacquant, 1996:127).

I find this theoretical twist quite remarkable. It is, to my knowledge, unique in social theory as far as the relation between structure and agency is concerned. Giddens (1992, 1984/1993), for example, envisages skilled actors to choose and modify institutions. Luhmann (1985/1995) has agents build institutions from reciprocal expectations confirmed by respective actions. Structuralism (Durkheim, 1965, Lévi-Strauss, 1977) assumes mental structures to shape agency. In each of these cases the assumption is that structure influences agency and/or vice versa. In contrast, Bourdieu's solution – take two dichotomous entities that are commonly perceived to interact, deny their immediate causal relation, and introduce a common third to which they are causally related – resembles a special group of theories in early modern rationalist philosophy connected with the names of Malebranche, Geulincx and Leibniz. Quite tellingly, these

philosophers set out to counter some of Descartes' dualist claims – as Bourdieu seeks to do. I believe it is worthwhile pursuing this thread because it can shed light from a new angle on how Bourdieu seeks to overcome the structure-agency dualism.

The presence of Leibniz in Bourdieu's works

Not much attention is paid to the influence of Leibniz in the English secondary literature on Bourdieu. Most books describe Bourdieu's concepts of habitus and field without any reference to the philosopher. In the same way, many enumerations of Bourdieu's intellectual sources (e.g. Harker et al., 1990) do not mention Leibniz at all. Exceptions to this are Robbins's more recent works on Bourdieu (Robbins, 2000, 2006) and an anthology on the philosophical contribution of Bourdieu by Shusterman (1999). Robbins (2000), in a small passage towards the end, places Bourdieu in the rationalist tradition of Leibniz that celebrates the randomness of plurality and the multiplicity of possible worlds and rejects Cartesian dualisms. In Shusterman's anthology, Bouveresse (1999) describes how Leibniz links the habitus of agents to their dispositions, and how Leibniz distinguishes between spontaneous and free actions. For Leibniz, habitus is the technical term for describing the fact that something happens because the agent has a disposition to make it happen, in which case the agent can be said to have a habitus for that something. For him, the behaviour of an agent is the product of the habitus. Nevertheless, he says, this behaviour can be spontaneous because he defines 'spontaneous' as the principle of the action lying within the agent. Spontaneous behaviour can moreover be free if the action is preceded by an act of deliberation. In that sense, animals can act spontaneously but not freely, and in the same sense actions

that result from the habitus are spontaneous but not free. The parallels to Bourdieu's notion of the habitus are quite striking. In the same anthology, Pinto (1999) shows how the notion of the habitus as an acquired possession marked with time can be traced back to Leibniz's critique of Cartesian mechanism. While Descartes held that movement was a succession of points observed by someone, Leibniz emphasised the internal qualities of movement, i.e. the fact that it was determined by previous movements and future states and that it contained a dynamic principle (the energy) that caused the movement. Finally, the most comprehensive discussion of Leibniz's influence on Bourdieu can be found in Robbins's most recent work (Robbins, 2006). The author himself admits that it took him until 1997 to understand the importance of Leibniz for Bourdieu's thought. And although he discusses the philosopher mostly in a summary way relating to his overall impact on Bourdieu, Robbins leaves no doubt as to Leibniz's significance. Where Robbins goes into more detail, he discusses the philosopher's distinction between necessary and contingent propositions, his views on the role of mathematics or Leibniz's attempt to reconcile finalism and mechanism. In sum, however, it might be said that Leibniz does not figure prominently in the English secondary literature on Bourdieu and is not referred to regarding the issue I want to talk about, viz. the link between habitus and field.

Bourdieu himself refers to Leibniz on several occasions and in various regards. Scholars familiar with Bourdieu's biography will remember that he wrote his postgraduate thesis on one of Leibniz's works, the *Animadversiones*. In his major books, he refers to Leibniz on recurrent themes: one is his concept of 'symbolic evidence' (*evidentia ex terminis*) (Bourdieu, 1990:83, 1980/1990:68f., 1984/1993:29, Bourdieu and Wacquant,

1996:223), another his conviction that men mostly act without conscious thought (Bourdieu, 1980/1990:68f., 1997/2000:162, Bourdieu and Wacquant, 1996:131). The third and most pertinent to my topic is Leibniz's clock metaphor (Bourdieu, 1990:302, 1980/1990:59f.) in which he takes the example of two clocks running in sync with each other. Their continuous synchronisation can be achieved in three ways: first, by the watchmaker constantly correcting every deviation, second, by linking them mechanically, and third, by constructing them in such a way that their continuing synchronisation is guaranteed. Finally, there is his claim that events produce themselves with a certain probability even in the absence of strategic players (Leibniz's *pretentio ad existendum*) (Bourdieu, 1997/2000:215). We will discuss the latter two in more depth below.

Descartes and his dualisms

Starting from a position of universal doubt, Descartes (1644/1983) concluded that everything could be doubted except the existence of the one consciousness that harboured the doubts – this is the famous 'cogito ergo sum'. From this he inferred that there must be one ontological substance which he called 'res cogitans', i.e. thinking or consciousness[2]. This res was immaterial. A couple of other deductions then led him to the conclusion that there was a second substance: 'res extensa', i.e. extension or matter. Ontologically speaking, the two were dichotomous, i.e. every entity in the universe belonged either to the one or the other group of res – this led to the mind-matter dualism. Epistemologically speaking, it was clear for Descartes that a consciousness never perceived pure matter but colours, sounds, etc., which were not qualities of the

matter but something produced or added by the perceiver[3]. In this sense, perception of material objects was 'distorted' – this led to the subject-object dualism.

Descartes encountered immediate problems with his dualist ontology when he was forced to explain how, in human beings, an immaterial intention or decision could lead to a bodily movement, e.g. raising one's arm. How could the res cogitans and the res extensa be causally related? Descartes resorted to 'spirits' moving in the nervous system and being directed by the pineal gland, which in turn could be affected by the soul, but even contemporaries found the explanation not very convincing as it was still unclear how the soul (a res cogitans) could affect the pineal gland (a res extensa).

Descartes' Critics

Among the many critiques of the Cartesian ontology, three were to have a lasting impact on philosophy (Anon., 2002, Röd, 1978, 1984, Russell, 1946/1995):

- Spinoza theorised that both res extensa and res cogitans were part of the only truly existing substance, which was God. This led to a pantheistic, panpsychistic view of the world, in which God inhabited everything and could thus mediate between mind and matter.

- Malebranche and other so-called 'Occasionalists' kept the dichotomy, but stipulated that God interfered each time mind and matter were supposed to interact. Thus, for example, if I decided to lift my arm, God would notice this and make my arm rise shortly after I had made the decision.

- Leibniz, finally, took a similar stance as Malebranche, but thought it quite unprofessional for the Creator to intervene in every single instant. So Leibniz proposed that God – obviously a perfect mathematician - had created the world in a way that every mind and every object followed their pre-ordained paths, which were adjusted to each other. Thus the trajectory of my mind would determine that I took the decision to lift my arm at one particular point in my life, and moments after my body, following its trajectory, would act in a way that appeared to be causal, but in reality was not. This is Leibniz' notion of 'pre-established harmony'. In comparison with Descartes, Leibniz (1714/1998) thus views res cogitans and res extensa as parallels that do not interact at all. It is only through God that they have a mediated relationship.

We can see that the three positions mirror the three options in Leibniz's clock metaphor that I introduced above. Translated into contemporary theories, Bourdieu (Bourdieu, 1980/1990:302) identifies Malebranche's solution of continuous creation with the reproduction of the field by means that are not immanent to the field, for example the free will of agents, which acts as a 'deus ex machina' as far as social order is concerned. Spinoza's view might be likened to idealist conceptions of a collective spirit permeating the actors and the field. Bourdieu's solution, finally is that of Leibniz in so far as the habitus of the individual actors are in a pre-established (i.e. established long before the point of observation) harmony with the field.

Leibniz, however, modifies Descartes' system even further. Descartes had based his physics on geometry. Leibniz, in contrast, believes that physical extension is different

from geometrical extension as a point in physics has an extension, however small, while a geometrical point has not. Instead, Leibniz seeks to base his physics on the notion of force implying that every physical occurrence can be traced back to a force. This relates to the *pretentio ad existendum* introduced above. The force that creates an object lies in the subject that perceives[4] it. To Leibniz, the subject does not create representations of the object in its mind, but creates the object itself. It does this by unifying a manifold of perceptions into one object. Thus the object's existence depends entirely on the subject. This subject - the Cartesian res cogitans - he calls 'monad'. In consequence, the subject gives structure to the world it perceives, and it is only the subject (and God, of course) that has the force to bring change about. It also changes itself with every perception it has. The force in the subject is called entelechy, the old Aristotelian term for the teleological striving of an organism. Forces in physics are then a derivative of this original force. This makes sense, because Leibniz believes that we could not have the idea of a force in objects if we did not have or feel a similar force in us. Finally, as every monad perceives the world in total, it is a microcosm in itself. However, as each perceives the world from a different angle, each microcosm is different. This is Leibniz' relativist epistemology.

Leibniz and Bourdieu

Although Bourdieu mentions Leibniz explicitly in a number of places, I believe Leibniz's influence to be much more pervasive than the explicit references would suggest. In order to show how close both systems are, I have collated a selection of quotes from Bourdieu in table 1.

INSERT TABLE 1 ABOUT HERE

While I do not claim that Bourdieu has developed these notions under the exclusive influence of Leibniz, I think the parallels in the theoretical arrangement quite interesting. With Leibniz as a theoretical foil, it is possible to argue for a theoretical construct (the habitus) that is at the same time individual, i.e. particular and different from every other, as well as modifiable through experiences, but also general in the sense of relating to a common field. As Leibniz's monads have their individual entelechies and trajectories, as they are modified by every perception they integrate, so Bourdieu's individual habitus are unique and modifiable. As Leibniz's monads are co-ordinated through the force (God) that originally created them, so Bourdieu's habitus are integrated by a common history that originally created them. The difference between both authors lies in the creating force and its qualities; for Leibniz it is an omniscient God, for Bourdieu it is history – a less perfect watchmaker - which may have its discontinuities and thus produce habitus that are ill-suited to meet the requirements of the present.

The field, on the other hand, is pure relationality. It does not consist of objects that are then, in a second step, related to each other. Rather, the field is these relations, and the relations then constitute objects. Bourdieu (see table 1) repeatedly emphasises this idea. The agentic structure that bundles relations into objects is, in Leibniz's terms, the monad. In opposition to the Cartesian ego that first is and then perceives, the monad is because it perceives. It constitutes itself in the act of perceiving. This is the important

prerequisite for overcoming the traditional subject-object dualism, for the monad only becomes (a subject) when it relates to objects. And it is only in this moment that the objects become objects because the monad construes them as such. Finally, Leibniz's notion of the force within each monad (entelechy) plays an important role when it comes to conceptualising the field as something that evolves even without the input of strategic agents. The social world, as Bourdieu (1980/1990:54) stresses, has a history and *as such* an internal dynamic.

Does it matter? I believe indeed that the study of Leibniz can clarify some issues in Bourdieu's work and may be helpful to deflect some of the critique directed against him. I should like to substantiate my claim by taking a closer look at two authors who criticise Bourdieu's habitus for leading into structuralist determinism. My first example is Anthony King, who accuses Bourdieu of 'relapsing into objectivism' with the concept of the habitus:

> 'Individuals automatically live out an objective social destiny as a result of the habitus. […] for the habitus ensures that the individual will inevitably act according to the logic of the situation.' (King, 2000:423) And later: 'If every individual is constrained by his habitus, then the objective conditions will simply be reproduced (by the habitus) and no social change will take place.' (King, 2000:428)

In the light of our preceding discussion of Leibniz, I think King fails to see that the habitus is not a structure in an essentialist sense, but a generative mechanism or a creative force that produces things instead of merely reproducing them. The idea of an entelechy is, in fact, quite the opposite of a reproductive capacity. It is a force following

an individual trajectory determined by individual occasions. It is something that moves or progresses. It is not a simple representation of an objective social destiny 'inside' an individual's head (that would be the Cartesian solution) that serves as a blueprint for identical future actions. From what I have explained about the monad and its relation to the world, we can see that the habitus is the objective social destiny subjectivised. It is – which is the same in a Leibnizian perspective - the relation between the individual and the objective social destiny. And it – again the same – only becomes objective social destiny because it is construed as such. King's mistake, I believe, is to remain in the traditional structure-agency dualism in which structure is retentive and only agency is active and can bring about change. This opposition basically follows Descartes dichotomy between passive matter and active mind. However, this is not how Leibniz sees it, and I hence I believe it is not how Bourdieu sees it. The monad is structure, or configuration, because in a relational philosophy every being is a structured bundle of relations. Yet, at the same time, monads are the only agents in the universe. They are structured agents or an agentive structure. And I believe this is what Bourdieu has in mind for his habitus.

Leibniz's explication may also have helped Richard Jenkins (1992:79), who talks of a 'characteristically elliptical and opaque formulation' and accuses Bourdieu of offering three different views of the habitus:

'... that the habitus is 'the site of the internalization of reality and the externalization of internality.' Elsewhere he talks about 'the dialectical relationship between the objective structures and the cognitive and motivating structures which they produce and which tend to reproduce them'. Elsewhere again, we read that the habitus is 'objectively adjusted to the particular conditions in which it is constituted', or that

'The conditioning is associated with a particular class of conditions of existence produce habitus.' So, we have at least three different views: objective conditions produce the habitus, the habitus is adjusted to objective conditions, and there is a reciprocal or dialectical relationship between them.'

Indeed, following Leibniz, as I have explained above, it is possible to say that the habitus is produced by and adjusted to and dialectical vis-à-vis the field. It is – akin to Archer's (1995) solution – time that does the trick because these three views are snapshots, so to speak, of the habitus-field relation at different moments in time. This is the nature of a mediated dualism as introduced by Leibniz.

Overcoming Dualisms?

As indicated above, a number of dichotomies come into play in social theory, and they are linked through their Cartesian heritage. In Bourdieu's work, the dichotomy of mind (symbol) and matter is conceptually retained, i.e. mind and matter remain distinct concepts. However, Bourdieu notes that every object is of a dual nature, i.e. has symbolic and material characteristics. Social reality exists in things and minds (see the quotation in table 1). Like Leibniz, he does not seek to circumvent or abolish the dichotomy. His theory of practice shows that both modes, the symbolic and the material, language and the body, always go together: Institutions are initially founded on symbolic distinctions, but these distinctions become naturalised in the habitus. Body and language function as depositories of thought. Practical belief, which ties the habitus to a particular field, is for the most part pre-reflexive bodily behaviour and only to a

small extent conscious sense-making. These examples show that although Bourdieu's notions of habitus and practice are explicitly designed to redirect attention from a symbolic-cognitive perspective of society towards a material and pre-reflexive one, the material aspect never substitutes the symbolic one nor are they fused in a novel theoretical concept. Bourdieu breaks with the traditional emphasis, not with the distinction itself.

Of all dichotomies, the subject-object dichotomy is perhaps the one that Bourdieu has directed his attention to most explicitly. He develops his "theory of practice' with the stated aim (Bourdieu, 1980/1990) to overcome it. His practical world is a teleological one, where objects are construed rather than observed. The construction is achieved by the subject based on its habitus. The habitus, in turn, is a structure that reflects the structure of the individual's environment in the past. The structural as well as the teleological and the constructivist emphasis are reminiscent of Leibniz' system. The subject becomes the dominant pole in perception, but 'carries the world within'. It thus combines traditionally subjective (teleology, construction) and traditionally objective (structure) aspects.

The structure-agency debate, finally, is partly tied to his subjective-objective solution. As I have tried to show in the preceding section, Leibniz's influence on Bourdieu is perhaps most visible here because of the unique nature of his theoretical solution. On the conceptual level of the construction of the habitus, the relational ontology leaves Bourdieu free to conceptualise structure as agentic. On the macro level of the interplay between field and habitus, he can use Leibniz's mediated dualism to construe, on the

one hand, how the habitus is shaped by the field, but how, on the other hand, they retain a dialectical relationship with one another. The key to dissolve the contradiction in this is time or history as, roughly speaking, the shaping happens at a different time, i.e. earlier, than the interaction in the field. This is the idea of pre-established harmony – with the caveat that in using this term we have to ignore all the normative connotations that go with it like happiness, peacefulness or perfection. Let us remember that Leibniz was also a mathematician, and his 'best of all possible worlds" is the result of an optimisation in which 'best' does not presuppose 'good' in any way. Summing up, Bourdieu overcomes this dualism in his construction of the habitus, but he retains it in the dialectical opposition between field and habitus. As I stated at the beginning, I think this mediated dualism is quite an intriguing solution.

Conclusion

Reading Bourdieu from a Leibnizian perspective can, I believe, offer a better understanding of Bourdieu's theory construction and major concepts. I still do not hold that Leibniz constituted the major influence on his works – this is why this is a research note and not a book. However, I hope to have shown that Leibniz helps in understanding how Bourdieu tackles the dichotomies he aims at overcoming. Moreover, some of the critique directed against the habitus and Bourdieu's apparent structuralism or determinism seems to be situated in a Cartesian worldview that Leibniz has rejected quite explicitly.

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Notes

[1] Although this dichotomy is the concern of sociologists rather than philosophers, it replicated the inside-outside distinction of the Cartesian subject-object-relation with agency playing the inner, subjective part and structure the external, objective part.

[2] Which at the time were synonyms.

[3] These so-called 'secondary qualities" occupied all contemporary authors, whether rationalists or empiricists.

[4] Perception in this case is not sense perception because the subject is a res cogitans and thus pure thinking without any sense organs.