**Brandom’s Leibniz**

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**Abstract:** I discuss an objection by Margaret Wilson (1999) against Robert Brandom’s (1981) interpretation of Leibniz’s account of perceptual distinctness. According to Brandom, Leibniz holds that (i) the relative distinctness of a perception is a function of its inferentially articulated content, and (ii) apperception, or awareness, is explicable in terms of degrees of perceptual distinctness. Wilson alleges that Brandom confuses ‘external deducibility’ *from* a perceptual state of a monad *to* the existence of properties in the world, with ‘internally accessible content’ *for* the monad in that state. Drawing on Leibniz, I develop a response to Wilson on Brandom’s behalf.

***1. A telling exchange***

In this paper, I discuss a significant objection by Margaret Wilson (1999) against Robert Brandom’s (1981) interpretation of Leibniz’s ‘metaphysics of intentionality’ or, more precisely, Leibniz’s metaphysical account of perceptual distinctness.[[1]](#endnote-1) Brandom’s account is a detailed and rigorous intervention in a discussion of Leibniz's views on perceptual distinctness and representation that has, I believe, still not received the critical attention it deserves.[[2]](#endnote-2) Aside from its considerable explanatory potential as a work of Leibniz exegesis, we find in Brandom's account a creative and substantive precursor to the inferentialist account of representation for which Brandom is famous.[[3]](#endnote-3) One reason to approach Brandom’s reading of Leibniz, then, is to gain a richer sense of the development of one of the most important theories of representational content currently on offer, one that, as Brandom's treatment of Leibniz shows, suggestively draws inspiration from the philosophical tradition.[[4]](#endnote-4) Another reason why Brandom’s reading of Leibniz is significant is that it exhibits a unique type of historiographical methodology, one that Brandom colorfully characterizes as ‘bebop historiography,’ imagined as similar to the way ‘in which a melody is treated as an occasion for improvisation on its chord structure.’[[5]](#endnote-5) Such hermeneutic improvisation involves ‘navigat[ing] among different inferential perspectives on the conceptual contents deployed on the text.’[[6]](#endnote-6) In the present case, Brandom pursues this interpretive avenue in creatively limning the underlying conceptual apparatus used by Leibniz to express claims ‘about the mechanism underlying our capacity to think or represent various kinds of things.’ Brandom envisions that these claims, when brought to light, will prove consequential for a discursive, rationally integrated, and foundational understanding of our representational bearing in the world.[[7]](#endnote-7)

Brandom’s distinctive proposal, then, is to interpret Leibniz’s doctrine of degrees of perceptual distinctness in terms of the notion of *inference*. This is the proposal that Wilson targets. Brandom sees himself as seeking to fulfill two desiderata:

1. to provide a general explanation of how, on Leibniz’s view, monads are individuated by the degrees of distinctness of their perceptions, in spite of the fact that all monads represent the same thing (the entire universe); and
2. to illuminate Leibniz’s notion of awareness, or ‘apperception,’ without couching the notion of perceptual distinctness in terms of awareness from the outset.

Brandom’s approach to discharging (ii) is part of his broader account of monadic perception that aims principally to fulfill (i). That is, he attempts to explain individual differences in how monads perceive -- despite the commonality of what they perceive, viz., the entire universe -- by arguing that a given monad is distinguishable from every other in virtue of the particular features of the world that can be differentially deduced from consideration of the particular content of each of that monad’s perceptual states at a time. The relative *distinctness* of a perception is a function of its inferentially articulated content: the greater the specification or enrichment of that content, the more it enables inferences[[8]](#endnote-8) from the properties or accidents ‘enfolded’ in the perception to properly discriminated features of the world. Finally, Brandom seeks to account for apperception as one *type* of perception – higher-order perception -- and hence as explicable in terms of the notion of degrees of perceptual distinctness, which in turn is explicable in terms of the notion of inference.

Wilson’s criticism of this account consists in pointing out an ambiguity in the notion of ‘inference’ that Brandom appeals to. On the one hand, Brandom clearly relies for his characterization of Leibniz’s view of perception on the idea that inferences can (somehow) be drawn from the consideration or report of the content of monadic perceptions to the existence of properties in the world which those perceptions ‘enfold’ or which constitute the latter’s content. On the other hand, in a few places Brandom speaks as if it is the *monads* *themselves* which are supposed to be able to conduct such inferences concerning the content of their own perceptions. In such places, Brandom seems willing to invoke the notion of a monad’s *taking* certain features of the world to be inferable from its own perceptions. This is to invoke what Wilson calls the ‘intensional features of Leibniz’s notion of perception’ (Wilson 1999, 337). According to Wilson, this twofold appeal to the notion of inference is incoherent as a general interpretation of Leibniz’s views on monadic perception because it suggests, implausibly, that even what Leibniz calls ‘bare monads’ somehow ‘experience representationally,’ whereas Leibniz clearly seems to deny to bare monads any experience of *what* they represent. For Wilson, the decisive flaw underlying this oversight is a conflation of the notion of Leibnizian perception as involving ‘external deducibility’ *from* the objective occurrence of a perceptual state of a monad *to* the existence of properties in the world represented by that state, with the notion of ‘internally accessible content or representationality’ *for* the monad that has it (Wilson 1999, 341).

This objection is potentially devastating to Brandom’s account. If Wilson is right, then Brandom’s putative attempt to account for the distinctness of monadic perceptions in terms of monads’ awareness of what they perceive is spurious, because not all monads are aware of what they perceive. After providing the relevant Leibnizian background and canvassing Brandom’s account and Wilson’s major criticism thereof, I shall pursue a response to this criticism on Brandom’s behalf. The response is modest: I shall argue that Wilson overlooks a natural way to read Brandom’s interpretation on which Brandom does not commit the conflation Wilson alleges. In fact, I'll try to show, interpreting Brandom's text in the way I will propose reveals the substantial *agreement* between Brandom and Wilson concerning the proper way to understand Leibniz's theoretical commitments in this context. Wilson’s oversight is valuable nevertheless, for it forces us to confront one of the most central and seemingly intractable puzzles in Leibniz's metaphysics and philosophy of mind, namely, how to make sense of the representationality of unconscious mental states. It is from considering the motivation and meaning behind Wilson’s noteworthy objection to Brandom’s account that we learn to appreciate the inherent tensions in Leibniz’s doctrine of degrees of perception, the depth of Brandom’s grasp of these tensions, and the resourcefulness of Brandom’s positive proposals for how to resolve them.

In the next section, I review some of the essential components of Leibniz’s metaphysics relating to his account of distinctness of perception, identifying and developing the main issue of concern between Brandom and Wilson on this topic. This discussion will serve to motivate the above two desiderata concerning the grounding of monadic individuation in perceptual distinctness and the place of awareness in that account. In section 3, I discuss Brandom’s proposal and how it purports to meet these explanatory desiderata. In section 4, I canvass Wilson’s main objection to Brandom’s proposal. Here I attempt to give Wilson’s worry a fair hearing before showing, in section 5, why it does not decisively undermine the explanatory potential of Brandom’s account, and how we may in fact rely on Wilson's own positive approach to making sense of monadic perception to show how Brandom’s account does not fall prey to Wilson’s critique.

Before I proceed, I should mention that a previous engagement with Brandom’s reading of Leibniz (and Wilson's critique of it), that of Stephen Puryear (2006), covers some of the same ground as does the current treatment. I am indebted to Puryear’s careful and comprehensive account of Brandom’s position, as I indicate in various notes in the section where I offer my own (less thoroughgoing) explication of it. However, Puryear and I emphasize different aspects of Brandom’s account of representation in Leibniz in assessing Brandom’s views, as well as different elements of Wilson’s critique of those views.[[9]](#endnote-9) Whereas Puryear’s account and assessment are more holistic, covering most aspects of Brandom’s theory, I emphasize the problem presented by bare monads for Leibniz’s views about awareness and Brandom’s reconstruction thereof. Puryear, too, offers a defense of Brandom’s account against charges by Wilson, but I believe that my proposed defense of Brandom is importantly new. Overall, then, I believe that my own more restricted discussion of Brandom’s account and Puryear's more comprehensive one ought to be seen as complementary.[[10]](#endnote-10)

***2. Leibnizian background: Developing the main problem***

Wilson describes very nicely the central point at issue in her evaluation of Brandom’s account. Vividly illustrating what will be her focal distinction between external deducibility and internal accessibility of content, Wilson (1999, 350 n. 27) likens monads to house plants of distinct kinds situated respectively in isolated rooms of a house, reflecting Leibniz’s view of the causally isolated existence of each monad in the universe. Her question is whether the ability to deduce facts about the location of each plant in the house, as derived from knowledge of some assumed rule or regularity according to which they are placed there (external deducibility), can be thought to have any intelligible implications for what each *plant* knows or perceives about the arrangements and types of the plants in other rooms in the house (internal accessibility of content). Wilson’s basic point is that even if (knowledge of) a law or regularity makes it possible to deduce general features of a situation from features of its component parts, it of course does not follow that the component parts of that situation themselves have the wherewithal to comprehend or perceive *any* features of the situation of which they are a part. Transferring this insight to the case of monads, however, generates a problem, since Leibniz holds that all monads perceive their world with varying degrees of perceptual distinctness. But while not all monads comprehend or are aware of what they perceive, *some* do consciously apprehend the world. How is this fact to be understood within the overarching paradigm of varying levels of perceptual distinctness? As Wilson (1999, 343) aptly states the problem:

Leibniz’s distinction between *distinct* and *confused* perception cannot just be read as a distinction between *conscious* and *unconscious* perceptions, since it has to be applicable *within* the realm of wholly unconscious monads. For similar reasons, it cannot be identified with a distinction between perceptions that do possess internal intensionality, and those which merely “express the many in the one” in a way that allows external inference from the “perceiver” to the “perceived”. For (I am supposing) bare monads do not *experience* representationally any more than they experience consciously. The question, then, is whether anything can be made of the distinction between distinct and confused perceptions that does not trade on either internal intensionality or the distinction between conscious and unconscious perceptions.

As we will see repeatedly, the disagreement between Wilson and Brandom hinges on the apparent threat that unconscious or bare monads pose to the intelligibility of Leibniz’s proposal that perception extends to all monads. How can we know what a perception is like *prior* to its being (or becoming) something of which we are aware, or which can itself be understood as a form of awareness? Ultimately, whether Brandom or Wilson ends up making the better case depends on what is the most plausible answer to this question. Wilson sets up the problem in the above passage by identifying two related distinctions that she believes are spuriously identified with Leibniz’s distinction between distinct and confused perception, namely the distinctions between (respectively) conscious and unconscious perception, and internal accessibility and external deducibility of content. Both of these latter distinctions involve the notion of consciousness or (what appears to be much the same thing) internal accessibility of content. For this reason, Wilson points out, neither of these distinctions can be applicable *within* the category of *unconscious* monads, whereas Leibniz does hold that the distinct/confused distinction *is* applicable to this category because (as we will shortly see) all monads perceive distinctly to *some* degree. But if that is right, then we are left with the puzzle of how to elucidate Leibniz’s distinction between distinct and confused perception in a way that does not depend on either of the distinctions between conscious and unconscious perception or internal accessibility and external deducibility of content.

We see, therefore, that in terms of the two desiderata I presented above as those which Brandom’s account chiefly aims to fulfill, desideratum (ii), concerning how to give a non-question-begging explanation of Leibniz’s conception of awareness, constitutes what we may regard as the *main problem* with which Wilson and Brandom are both concerned. My goal in this section is to document (albeit in a cursory manner) the source of this problem in Leibniz’s texts. Let us begin with the most familiar data. In Leibniz’s late metaphysics, monads – simple, immaterial, and indestructible ‘atoms of nature’ (*Monadology* §3) -- are regarded as the building blocks out of which all of reality is constituted.[[11]](#endnote-11) The distinctive attribute of monads is that they *perceive* and indeed are *constituted* wholly by perceptions (and subject to a force or appetite that brings about transitions from one perception to another). As Leibniz writes in a famous letter to Burcher de Volder, ‘... we must say that there is nothing in things but simple substances [i.e. monads] and in them, perception and appetite’ (AG 181).

Leibniz classifies monads into three types. At the bottom of his metaphysical hierarchy are ‘bare’ or ‘simple’ monads. Simple monads constitute simple living things like plants and ‘other sorts of living thing that are entirely unknown to us’ (GP VI.539).[[12]](#endnote-12) Like all monads, bare monads perceive in some sense; however, they are presumed to be wholly unconscious or else in a kind of preponderantly confused stupor. Thus, in one place Leibniz writes: ‘if, in our perceptions, we had nothing distinct or, so to speak, in relief and stronger in flavor, we would always be in a stupor. And this is the state of bare monads’ (M §24, AG 216). Whether it is correct to view bare monads as wholly unconscious or (as Simmons 2011 considers) as subject to a kind of Jamesian blooming buzzing confusion, what appears uncontroversial is that, as Alison Simmons puts it, ‘simple monads have perceptions that represent things but they are not, in virtue of those perceptions, aware of anything in particular’ (2011, 199).

At the middle level of the metaphysical hierarchy are animal souls, sentient beings which are capable of apperception but not rational thought.[[13]](#endnote-13)  At the highest level are rational souls capable of introspection and discursive thought.[[14]](#endnote-14) Both animal (sentient) souls and rational (sapient) souls are distinguished from bare monads by their possession of sensation and memory.

Leibniz implicates all three types of monad in a crucial statement about the character and scope of perceptual distinctness in *Monadology* §60:

[S]ince the nature of the monad is representative, nothing can limit it to represent only a part of things. However, it is true that this representation is only confused as to the detail of the whole universe, and can only be distinct for a small portion of things, that is, either for those that are closest, or for those that are greatest with respect to each monad, otherwise each monad would be a divinity. Monads are limited, not as to their objects, but with respect to the modifications of their knowledge of them. Monads all go confusedly to infinity, to the whole; but they are limited and differentiated by the degrees of their distinct perceptions [*les degrés des perceptions distinctes*].(AG 221)

I want to highlight two important points from this passage. First, it claims that it is the very nature of a monad to represent; as Leibniz explains elsewhere, a monad’s perceptions just are its (intrinsic) properties.[[15]](#endnote-15) Second, monads differ from one another neither in their being essentially representative nor in what they perceive -- the entire universe -- but in how distinctly they perceive it. Notice that this principle is supposed to apply to *all* monads, not just those that are conscious. This passage thus provides for the generalizability of facts about perceptual distinctness to all monads, conscious and unconscious alike: the basic principles of monadic representation extend to monads at any level of the hierarchy.

Thus, monads are categorized comprehensively by their mental capacities, and distinguished individually by the distinctness of their perceptions, a measure which cuts across monadic categories. This picture raises two questions: (1) How does the notion of perceptual distinctness figure in the individuation of monads within and across the monadic categories? (2) If all perceptions are distinct to *some* degree, as this passage implies, then why aren’t all monads correspondingly conscious to some degree? Notice that these two questions respectively generate the two main desiderata -- (i) and (ii) above -- that Brandom thinks interpretations of Leibniz on this issue ought to fulfill: to account for how individual differences among monads are based on differences in the degrees of distinctness of their perceptions, and to give a fully general account of Leibniz’s views on perceptual distinctness that explains its relation to apperception but does not trade on an antecedent conception of intrinsic awareness or ‘internally accessible content.’ To begin to appreciate the depth of these issues, we must have a glimpse of what Leibniz says about the nature of perception, the way monads are individuated by their perceptions, and the nature of apperception and its place within the mental economy of monads. In the remainder of this section, I briefly present Leibniz’s (sometimes seemingly ambiguous) views on these topics before turning to a discussion of Wilson’s and Brandom’s handling of these issues.

As we will examine in detail, Brandom connects Leibniz’s notion of perception constitutively to the notion of inference or inferrability. This interpretive move has a firm basis in what Leibniz says about perception. For Leibniz, perception is a species of representation or ‘expression.’ As Leibniz defines the notion of expression in one place: ‘It is sufficient for the expression of one thing in another that there should be a certain constant relational law, by which particulars in the one can be referred to corresponding particulars in the other’ (C 15, MP 176-77; quoted in Jorgensen 2015, 51). Leibniz describes expression in generic terms as a kind of a rule-based mapping from one thing onto another, as in the projection of a circle onto a regular plane, which supplies the rule for the mapping of a circle onto an ellipse, a parabola, or a hyperbola. Any of these latter figures, on this account, will ‘express’ a circle.[[16]](#endnote-16) Leibniz maintains that structural mappings of the latter kind obtain between such diverse things as a model of a machine and the machine itself, speech and thoughts or truths, and -- most relevant to our discussion -- a substance and the entire universe.[[17]](#endnote-17) It is possible to see how Leibniz takes what Wilson calls ‘external inferrability’ as an essential condition on representation as such, for, on a plausible reading of the doctrine of expression, if *x* represents/expresses *y*, then it must be possible to *reason* about features of *x* in way that correspondingly enables us to reason about features of *y*.[[18]](#endnote-18)

*Perception*, on the other hand, is regarded by Leibniz specifically as ‘the expression of many in one.’ This is generally taken to mean that in perception, the one, i.e. the simple substance, expresses the many, i.e. things external to the substance (see e.g. PNG §2). Leibniz also maintains that ‘each singular substance expresses the whole universe in its own way’ (DM §9), which, given the definition of perception, must mean that each singular substance *perceives* the entire universe in its own way.[[19]](#endnote-19) Leibniz supposes that perception exhibits the features of expression in general, in that the internal perceptual structure of a monad ‘preserves the correlating structure of the universe’ (Jorgensen 2015, 55). But, importantly, what differentiates perception from other types of expression is its association with a *point of view*. The notion of a point of view implies that monads differ in terms of how their perceptions preserve the correlational structure between those perceptions and the perceptions of every other monad (which collectively constitute the metaphysical structure of the whole universe). Leibniz cashes out the notion of a point of view in terms of perceptual distinctness, as we saw in the passage from *Monadology* §60: a monad’s point of view is defined by what it most distinctly represents.

But how are we to measure differences in the distinctness of a given monad's individual perceptions (perceptions which carve out the monad's singular point of view, serving to distinguish the monad from all other monads defined in turn by their unique points of view)? One might well think that consciousness has something to do with this question. Thus, for instance, we might ask whether we can track differences in the relative degree of distinctness of monads’ perceptions by assessing the relative clarity of our awareness of the content of those perceptions. Such questions are indeed appropriate, since even a cursory investigation of Leibniz's texts reveals that observations or claims that Leibniz makes concerning the nature of perceptual distinctness typically go hand in hand with observations and claims about consciousness. Understanding the relationship between consciousness and perceptual distinctness was undeniably a major objective for Leibniz.

In fact, Leibniz's views on this topic initially appear somewhat ambiguous. In the first place, he sometimes writes about the relation of apperception to perception as such, where the latter isn’t specifically qualified as distinct*.* Thus, in several places Leibniz seems to claim that perception (per se) is not coextensive with consciousness, i.e. that consciousness does not extend to all perceptions. For example, he writes:

The passing state which involves and represents a multitude in the unity or in the simple substance is nothing other than what one calls *perception*, which should be distinguished from apperception, or consciousness. … This is where the Cartesians have failed badly, since they took no account of the perceptions that we do not apperceive. This is also what made them believe that minds alone are monads and that there are no animal souls or other entelechies. … (M §14, AG 214; cf. PNG §4, NE 134)

One might grant, in accordance with passages like this, that ‘perception’ and ‘apperception’ are not coextensive – bare monads, or ‘other entelechies,’ as Leibniz implies here, being the prime counterexample to the view that consciousness goes all the way down. But when reference to the relation of apperception to the *distinctness* of perception enters the picture, it seems prima facie to yield a different conclusion. In this context, there is evidence that Leibniz espouses the view that *insofar as they are* *distinct*, perceptual states are *also* conscious states. According to this alternative, a perception with any degree of distinctness at all *would* also be conscious to some degree. This is suggested by passages such as the following:

We are never without perceptions, but necessarily we are often without *awareness*, namely when none of our perceptions stand out. (NE 162)

But since each distinct perception of the soul includes an infinity of confused perceptions which embrace the whole universe, the soul itself knows the things it perceives only so far as it has distinct and heightened perceptions; and it has perfection to the extent that it has distinct perceptions. Each soul knows the infinite -- knows all -- but confusedly. It is like walking on the seashore and hearing the great noise of the sea: I hear the particular noises of each wave, of which the whole noise is composed, but without distinguishing them. (PNG §13, AG 211).

[A] soul can read in itself only what is distinctly represented there; it cannot unfold all of its folds at once, because they go to infinity. (AG 221)

In these passages, Leibniz seems to treat degrees of distinctness *as* degrees of awareness. This is one conclusion we might glean from these passages,[[20]](#endnote-20) but we are not automatically entitled to uphold it. For, in the first place, Leibniz never explicitly identifies degrees of distinctness with degrees of apperception. Second, as we saw, passages such as §60 of the *Monadology* suggest that all monads have perceptions that are distinct to some degree, even though not all are capable of awareness. These caveats suggest that Leibniz might not have wanted to regard degrees of perceptual distinctness as coextensive with degrees of awareness. Significantly, however, the possibility that Leibniz did reject the coextensiveness of awareness and (degrees of) perceptual distinctness is compatible with the view, minimally expressed in the above three passages, that sufficiently distinct perception is a *necessary condition* on apperception.

Assuming the latter, minimal reading of the last three passages, and considering the points on apperception and perception made in the above-quoted passages from *Monadology* §60 and §14, we can view Leibniz as committed to the following notably consistent set of claims:

* All perceptions are distinct to some degree. (M §60)
* Not all perceptions, however distinct, are conscious. (M §14)
* Sufficiently distinct perception is necessary for consciousness. (e.g. NE 162, PNG §14)

These are all commitments that Brandom attributes to Leibniz and attempts to develop and integrate as part of a comprehensive account of Leibniz’s views on perceptual distinctness and its connection to apperception. The last point in the list above is crucial in motivating this enterprise because it leaves unsettled what else might be *sufficient* for apperception. Perhaps the answer lies in determining the precise threshold at which distinct perceptions turn into conscious ones; perhaps it lies in the way that higher-order perceptions operate on first-order perceptions, thereby affecting their degree of distinctness. In any case, Leibniz’s appealing to distinct perception as a necessary condition on apperception leaves open a unique explanatory challenge. For Leibniz, apperception is an *explanandum*, to be explained *in terms of* perceptual distinctness.[[21]](#endnote-21)

Brandom seems perfectly conscious of this point: ‘The crucial explanatory role played in Leibniz’s metaphysics by the various degrees of perception ... lends urgency to the question of how we are to understand the dimension along which qualitative comparisons of “perfection” or “distinctness” can be made.’ Once we countenance this fundamental explanatory role of the notion of perceptual distinctness, ‘the concept of *awareness* (Leibniz’s ‘apperception’) will emerge as what we must get clear about in order to appreciate the order of perfection of perceptions,’ i.e. the scheme of degrees of perceptual distinctness (1981, 450). That is, we must see how apperception is explained by the concept of distinct perception. This will give us a fuller sense of what Leibniz means when he invokes the notion of perceptual distinctness. Brandom, then, is attuned to the two desiderata stated at the beginning of this paper and is particularly aware of what I regard as our ‘main problem’ (desideratum [ii]). But does he succumb to this problem, nonetheless? We can now progress toward answering this question.

***3. Brandom’s proposal***

The core of Brandom’s proposal is that, just as we can speak of a series of properties or modifications contained in the individual *concept* of a monad, so we can speak of the *perceptual* containment of features of the world in individual perceptions of a monad. Brandom’s fundamental explanatory concept in this context is his notion of an ‘expressive range.’ He claims that not only do monads contain all of their perceptual modifications in the relevant sense, but *each* perception of a monad contains or ‘enfolds a multitude (of accidents), its expressive *range*’ (1981, 461). In other words, not only do a monad’s perceptual modifications express the monad, but also each one of those perceptions expresses a range of accidents, or non-maximal properties,[[22]](#endnote-22) of things external to the monad, so that given the concept of such a monad, one can deduce not only all of its perceptual modifications, but also everything expressed by its perceptions (1981, 462).

This model of inferential containment and the notion of an ‘expressive range’ have considerable potential to clarify Leibniz’s commitments to the distinctness of each monad (despite its perceiving everything that every other monad perceives) and to there being degrees of perceptual distinctness. As Brandom (1981, 462-63) observes:

...this interpretation gives a natural sense to talk of degrees of expression. For if many accidents are expressed in one perception, it is possible for more or fewer of them to be expressed by another perception. We may say that two perceptions differ in perceptual or expressive degree just in case the expressive range or content of one of them properly includes the range or content of the other.

Thus, while each monad expresses the entire universe, *how* each monad does so differs according to the distribution of accidents represented by its various perceptions. Individual perceptions vary intrinsically in the number of accidents that they ‘enfold,’ even though, collectively, they ultimately amount to representations of the same thing (the whole universe). The total content of a monad’s contemporaneous perceptions is also expressed by all other monads, but that content will be distributed differently among monads and among the perceptions of each monad in non-overlapping ways. This, then, is one way to represent differences in point of view among monads. Because of this internal variability in what individual monadic perceptions represent, such perception is best characterized, according to Brandom, as the representation of *more-or-less* *in one*. More specifically, Brandom explains the notion of a difference in expressive degree or inferential potential between the perceptions of any two monads in terms of set inclusion. A difference in expressive degree or inferential potential between the perceptions of any two monads is determined according to whether the content of one monad’s perceptions properly includes that of the other. If one perception is more distinct than another, this means that the former enfolds all the accidents of the latter and more.[[23]](#endnote-23)

To illustrate, consider three perceptions of a physical object (Brandom 1981, 463): *p*1 represents the object as red (its expressive range consists of a single accident), *p*2 represents it as cubical, and *p*3 represents it as red and cubical. *P*3 properly includes *p*1 and *p*2 individually. By virtue of its greater inclusiveness or superior richness, *p*3 is *more* distinct than *p*1 or *p*2, insofar as *p*1 cannot distinguish the relevant object from a red sphere, while *p*2 cannot distinguish it from a green cube. Perception *p*3 is thus ‘more distinguishing and more specific than the others,’ (Brandom 1981, 463). Brandom uses this example to illustrate his point precisely:

These perceptions [i.e. *p*1-*p*3] are distinguishable, since no two of them have the same expressive range. The monads these perceptions modify are accordingly distinguishable as well, since they are qualified by distinguishable modifications. Yet each monad expresses *every* feature of its world, since for each monad there is no accident not expressed by some one of its perceptions. Each complete set of a monad’s contemporary perceptions has the whole set of its world’s real accidents as the union of the expressive ranges of its perceptions. But the distribution of more and less inclusive expressive ranges over that set of perceptions differs from monad to monad, and from time to time within a single monad.... It is these differences in the distinctness (inferential potential) of the individual perceptions that jointly express the whole world which distinguish the various monads. (1981, 463-64)

In essence, then, Brandom’s view is that monads and their perceptions ‘divide up’ the ‘expressive labor’ of representing the world in different ways. To the extent that fewer perceptions are required to represent the infinite detail of the world, those perceptions have greater inferential potential, whereas perceptions that enfold fewer accidents (or are less inclusive) have less inferential potential and are less distinct.[[24]](#endnote-24)

In sum, according to Brandom the specificity (distinctness) of perception *brings out* the features of a monad's world, showing us that the unique distribution of content expressed by a monad's perceptions defines *this* monad's representative place in the world. We pass from the (differentially expressed) singulars of the perception to the corresponding singulars of a monad's perceived world, this ‘passage’ culminating in a conclusion about the makeup of the universe as ‘experienced’ from a singular point of view. (The vexed nature of such appeal to ‘experience’ will become an issue below, when we examine Wilson's critique of Brandom's view of monadic perception.) With this explanation, Brandom sees himself as having accounted for the connection between perception and expression more generally, what is meant by the ‘distinctness’ of perceptions, what the notion of a monadic point of view amounts to, and above all, how monads are to be individuated on the basis of their distinct perceptions. The foregoing explanation can therefore be taken to fulfill the first of the two desiderata with which we began. What about the second desideratum – our main problem?

As we saw in section 2, Leibniz closely associates perceptual distinctness with apperception: distinct perception is at least a necessary condition on awareness. However, Brandom thinks that the inferential potential model of perceptual distinctness has to be qualified to accommodate the notion of awareness, since in some contexts, Leibniz seems to suggest that we might be aware of perceptions that have relatively little expressive degree while being unaware of perceptions which have considerably greater expressive degree (1981, 467). To explain this phenomenon, Brandom introduces a new sense in which the term ‘distinct’ may be understood, building on Leibniz’s occasional references to perceptions being more or less *developed* (cf. NE 117).

Brandom assumes from the start that apperception, for Leibniz, is a matter of higher-order perception.[[25]](#endnote-25) He takes apperception to consists of two components: a perception of an outer object, and a further perception that has the first perception as its object. Thus, a perception *p* is developed if and only if (i) *p* to gives rise to (‘produces’) a further perception, *p*′, which in turn (ii) *specifies the content* of *p* such that the expressive range of *p*′ is a superset of (or includes) the expressive range of *p.*[[26]](#endnote-26) When conditions (i) and (ii) are met for a perception *p*, then *p* is apperceived and *p*′ is an apperception *of* *p* (Brandom 1981, 468)*.* In stating necessary *and* sufficient conditions on apperception, Brandom appeals not merely to the specification (inclusion or subsumption) of the content of a first-order perception by a higher-order perception, but also to the requirement that the first-order perception ‘produce’ the higher order perception in the right way. Brandom suggests that ‘being produced in the right way’ should be understood as involving memory on the part of an individual monad and as determined by a metaphysical ‘law’ that governs the unique passage of each monad from one of its perceptual states to another (1981, 468).

Aside from the added factors of memory and metaphysical production, Brandom’s explanation of what underlies apperception falls right out of his analysis of perceptual distinctness in terms of content-specification or inferential potential, providing us with the following, neat and simple way to view apperceptions in relation to ordinary, first-order perception. *All* increases of a perception’s expressive range constitute specification of its content and an increase of its distinctness. However, *apperceptions* are strictly developments of *other* perceptions, whereas perceptions that do not develop other perceptions are not apperceptions (1981, 468-70).

A major virtue of this account, Brandom shows, is the sense it makes of the vexed question of bodily awareness as it arises in the setting of Leibniz's monadology. Leibniz holds that the perceptions of which a monad is most aware are of things that are ‘nearest’ or ‘greatest’ with respect to the monad (see M §60 above). This might lead one to believe that on Leibniz's view a (dominant)[[27]](#endnote-27) monad's body must be that of which it is most aware. This obviously has problematic implications, for taking our own case as an example, it seems that at any given time we have greater awareness of objects distinct from us than we do of our bodies. Brandom's theory of perceptual distinctness and apperception enables him to address this counterintuitive result by giving him the resources to distinguish between two senses of ‘distinct.’ In the first sense, elaborated above, a perception is ‘distinct’ to the extent that it has comparatively greater specification of content and hence inferential potential. However, that a perception is distinct in this sense does not entail that it is a perception of which we must be more aware. For the latter to obtain, a perception must be ‘distinct’ in the measure of its *development*: perceptions of which we are aware are those that are more develop*ing*, regardless of their original inferential potential. This part of Brandom’s theory models how we can have greater awareness of objects at various degrees of distance from our bodies more distinctly that we are aware of our bodies themselves: although our perceptions of our bodies may have in themselves the greatest expressive degree (i.e., may have the richest content and be the locus of the most complex and extensive inferential connections we have to the rest of the world),[[28]](#endnote-28) they need not be the perceptions in us that give rise to ‘*more* expressive specifications of themselves’ -- that is, are the most developing. It is the latter, developing perceptions, Brandom stipulates, ‘that matter for awareness’ (1981, 470).

Brandom never assumes that all distinct perceptions are conscious perceptions. He does, however, provide the desired necessary and sufficient conditions on one’s being or becoming conscious of one’s distinct perceptions, namely, when one such perception gives rise to another perception whose expressive range subsumes or includes that of the first. At least as far as his *intentions* are concerned, Brandom seems to have successfully addressed our main problem, insofar as he uses his basic analysis of perceptual distinctness in order to gain purchase on Leibniz’s notion of awareness, and not the other way around.

Brandom’s initial suggestion is that Leibniz seeks to base ‘the concepts of awareness and representation on the concept of inference (even for monads incapable of thought)’ (1981, 450). We have just seen the extent to which the inferential model illuminates the concepts of perception and awareness in Leibniz’s theory of monadic representation. The litmus test for the successful generalizability of this interpretation, however, rests on whether Brandom can plausibly apply his account to the case of bare monads. Brandom clearly believes that he can, but Wilson thinks otherwise. Let us inspect her misgivings more closely.

***4. Wilson’s critique***

The essential feature of Brandom’s interpretation that strikes Wilson as controversial is Brandom’s view that (in Wilson’s words) ‘principles based on the harmony preestablished among the monads, by making possible inference from one monad’s perception to the accidents of the others, provide content *internally accessible* to any given monad,’ this allowing for ‘an intensional reading of expression’ (Wilson 1999, 341). Her criticism revolves around our main problem: how to provide a general account of perceptual distinctness that explains Leibnizian apperception and does not presuppose it or some type of ordinary rendition of it in the characterization of what makes perception distinct for Leibniz.

Wilson locates Brandom’s purported failure to achieve this task in his observation that his conception of perceptual distinctness allows for an ‘intensional reading of expression’ (Brandom 1981, 460). Wilson takes the following passage – call it ‘Passage B’ -- to be Brandom’s elaboration of the view about the content of monads’ perceptions that we acquire through such an ‘intensional’ reading:

A perception provides its monad with information about the rest of the world only insofar as the preestablished harmony provides principles (laws of Nature) which permit inferences from the occurrence of this particular perception, rather than any other possible one, to conclusions about facts outside the monad. We are assured of the existence of such principles only by metaphysical reasoning. The form in which that harmony manifests itself in the experience of particular monads is the physical or phenomenal world. It is accordingly facts couched in the phenomenal terms of *this* world that are the informational contents of perceptions as experienced by the monads those perceptions modify. For the monad, its world is the world of physical, perceptible attributes. Leibniz’s phenomenalism entails that the deductive relations between perceptions implied by the preestablished harmony are reflected by the deductive relations between those perceptions and features of the phenomenal things which appear to the perceiving monad as their objects. (Brandom 1981, 462)

Taken at face value, this passage asserts that: (i) monads receive through their perceptions information about the physical, perceptible world; (ii) monads ‘experience’ these perceptions; (iii) according to Leibniz’s doctrine of preestablished harmony and his purported phenomenalism about bodies, the (deductive) connections among the perceptions of each monad are ‘reflected’ or manifested in the (deductive) connections between perceived features of physical things which appear to each monad as the content of its perceptions.[[29]](#endnote-29)

All three of the above points appear to characterize monadic perception as something that presupposes the internal accessibility of perceptual representations – always tantamount to representations of certain features of the physical world -- for each monad to which they belong. Wilson sees in Brandom’s apparent commitment to internally accessible content a departure from the general line that he takes in his study. Indeed, as witnessed above, Brandom mostly speaks of differences in the distinctness of perceptual content as something that is manifested in different ways in which inference from a ‘third-person’ standpoint is enabled from the (somehow objectively reportable) content of a monad’s perceptions to the (also objectively reportable) instantiation of certain properties in the world.[[30]](#endnote-30)

For Wilson, the untoward result of this apparent inconsistency in Brandom’s approach is a view according to which the nature of monadic perception brings along intensionality or internally accessible content for all monads as intrinsic perceivers. This is problematic for the basic reason we’ve already encountered multiple times: that bare monads perceive yet do not have conscious access to the content of their perceptions. Thus, Wilson states her objection:

Brandom speaks of monads as having experiences, and being provided with information, without explaining how such characterizations are appropriate for wholly unconscious substances. Even if we assume that the laws of nature are somehow included in every monad, we cannot, I think, suppose that a non-conscious – indeed, non-rational – being makes “deductions.” Brandom attempts to combine in his interpretation the notions of *external deducibility* and *internally accessible content or representationality* ... (1999, 341)

In his alleged attempt to combine the notions of external deducibility and internally accessible content as part of a fully general account of monadic perception, then, Brandom overextends his account and ends up with an unrealistic picture of Leibniz’s views on perceptual distinctness.[[31]](#endnote-31) He fails to achieve his second desideratum by integrating a notion of awareness into his account of monadic perception from the start, whereas such an account must do without such an initial appeal in attempting to make sense of what Leibniz says about awareness and its relation to perception.

Wilson’s misgivings about Passage B and Brandom’s account seem appropriate. It is hard to reconcile the claims Brandom apparently makes in Passage B about the first-personal experiences of monads and the appearances they apprehend with other claims that Brandom presents as definitive of his account, such as this: ‘the expressive or representative nature of perception consists in the fact that from the existence of the modification of some monad which is a perceiving can be *inferred* the existence of various *accidents* or facts pertaining to its own monad or to others’ (1981, 460). This statement, like many others we have seen, characterizes perception in terms of Wilson’s notion of external deducibility. Brandom appreciates the distinction between this way of characterizing monadic perception and the alternative of explicating perception in terms of the internal accessibility of content, for he recognizes that the former model extends to bare monads whereas the latter does not (1981, 450).

Indeed, Brandom seems fully aware of the unintelligibility of ascribing first-person experience to unconscious monads. In discussing a claim that Leibniz makes to the effect that we have an innate *idea* of perception (see e.g. NE 45), Brandom points out that this must be an idea of *conscious* perception, i.e. apperception. This must be so because, as Brandom points out,

[w]e cannot say, “...[unconscious] perceptions are just like the ones which we are conscious of, only unconscious,” and claim thereby to have expressed an idea (clear or distinct) as one might say, “unobserved elephants are just like observed ones”; for, as Wittgenstein has pointed out, when mental states are at issue awareness is the only feature that matters. ... [I]t is clear that we cannot make the … notion of unconscious perception distinct merely by invoking a plenum of degrees of perception intermediate between those of which we are aware and those of which we are not. (1981, 459)

Brandom claims here that the *concepts* of unconscious perception or unconscious perceptual experience are, from our point of view, unintelligible (contrasting with the way in which the concept of an ‘unobserved elephant’, for example, is not). Although he does not mention bare monads here, it is clear that Brandom must agree with Wilson at least in principle that it is senseless to speak of the ‘internal accessibility’ of perceptions within the category of bare monads. This, of course, does not allay Wilson’s concern but only heightens it: if Brandom is aware of the underlying incoherence of the concept of unconscious perception, why then does he make the claims that he does in Passage B?

***5. Brandom recovered***

These concerns are pressing and, indeed, point to a major puzzle in Leibniz’s account of monadic perception concerning the role of awareness in perception and the possibility of individuating bare monads given their lack of relatively distinct perception. Wilson has her own solution to this puzzle, which consists in eschewing altogether the appeal to internal intensionality in explaining the meaning of Leibniz’s notion of degrees of perceptual distinctness in monads. Wilson insists that the only textually consistent interpretation of Leibniz's views on perceptual distinctness must advert to Leibniz's notions of action and passion, which he associates with perceptual states with greater and lesser degrees of distinctness, respectively. Leibniz often stresses the mutuality of monadic perception, consisting in one monad's action upon another monad which receives the former's action (see M §§49-56). Because, for Leibniz, active-passive (i.e., causal) relations between monads are only ideal, activity and passivity are explained in terms of a monad’s having perceptions that are more distinct than the corresponding perceptions of another monad. Crucially, Leibniz claims (as Wilson emphasizes) that such mutual relations of activity and passivity founded upon relative degrees of perceptual distinctness reflect, and are determined by, God’s reason for creating any given monad with more distinct perceptions than another, and not the other way around. Thus, according to Wilson, we must ‘suppose that the “perceptual” states of simple substances in general need not be attributed *internal* intensionality; rather, whatever they are, their relative distinctness may be understood in terms of their place in the order of reasons in *God's* mind’ (1999, 345).

Wilson advances this proposal specifically as a response to what she sees as Brandom's misguided ascription of internal intensionality to bare monads in Passage B. As I will attempt to show in this section, however, there is an alternative reading of Passage B that supports an account of the perceptual reality of bare monads that is entirely consistent with what Wilson believes to be the correct exegetical alternative to Brandom's account.[[32]](#endnote-32) My proposed reading, corroborated by texts of Leibniz, brings out the conceptual resources available to Brandom for accommodating the case of constitutively unconscious (or stuporous) bare monads within his larger reconstruction of Leibniz’s thought on perceptual distinctness. And, as we are about to see, Wilson’s lucid articulation of her own view not only meshes with but aids in comprehending the alternative reading of Passage B I am about to advocate.

Above, I provided a prima facie breakdown of the claims Brandom makes in Passage B as follows: (i) monads receive through their perceptions information about the physical, perceptible world; (ii) monads ‘experience’ these perceptions; (iii) according to Leibniz’s doctrine of preestablished harmony and his phenomenalism about bodies, the (deductive) connections among the perceptions of each monad are ‘reflected’ or manifested in the (deductive) connections between perceived features of physical things which appear to each monad as the content of its perceptions.

My proposal is this. We can neutralize the passage's allegedly troublesome appeal to internal accessibility by giving each of these three points a ‘flat’ reading, as follows.[[33]](#endnote-33) (i*'*) The ‘information’ received by each monad is there, to be consciously exploited, but not necessarily by the monad. (ii*'*) Monads ‘experience’ only in the sense of having or undergoing (cf. my tire experienced a puncture). (iii*'*) Phenomena ‘appear to’ the monad specifically in the sense of being there. Notably, none of these readings of the claims of Passage B says anything about internal accessibility of content. If there is enough evidence from Leibniz’s texts that Brandom’s proposals in Passage B can legitimately be given these flat readings, then Passage B no longer appears to militate against the general tenor of Brandom's account with its emphasis on external deducibility.

*5.1 Mirroring and intensionality*[[34]](#endnote-34)

In fact, there are clear and conspicuous expressions of all of these ‘flat’ reconstructions of Passage B in Leibniz's thinking about monads and their perceptions. Let us start by looking at evidence for Leibniz’s espousal of the type of situation described in (i*'*) as it pertains to the characterization of monadic perception. One of Leibniz’s chief ways of conveying the nature of a monadic point of view and the representational interrelatedness of monads is to characterize monads as ‘living mirrors.’ Wilson herself relies on Leibniz's appeal to this mirroring metaphor in textually corroborating her own take on the relative distinctness of monadic perceptions. She cites the following remark of Leibniz which offers a particularly helpful contrast implying how a monad might harbor or relate to perceptual content without consciously exploiting it (or being able to do so).

[T]he difference between intelligent substances and those which are not is as great as that between the mirror and him who sees (DM §35; quoted in Wilson 1999, 343).

For Leibniz, all monads are living mirrors, and their status as such derives from, and serves to reveal, the general ‘interconnection or accommodation of all created things to each other, and each to all the others, bring[ing] it about that each simple substance has relations that express all the others, and consequently, that each simple substance is a perpetual, living mirror of the universe’ (AG 220). In the above-quoted passage relating non-intelligent substances to mirrors, however, Leibniz is specifically comparing the separation that exists between a mirror and a beholder, on the one hand, with the separation between ‘intelligent’ and non-intelligent substances, on the other. Precisely, the analogy here concerns the greatness of the gulf between the elements in these contrastive pairs, rather than any direct parallel between the elements of each pair; but a purported analogy between the notions they contain certainly seems implied. If so, the passage delivers a concrete illustration of how the difference between monads at opposite poles of the monadic hierarchy depends on the different extent to which the monads can or cannot exploit the content of their perceptions.

Thus, suppose that I, an intelligent being, look in a mirror and see my own image. This image constitutes content or information that I, as an intelligent being, can respond to in many ways --I can use the image to pass judgment on my body or otherwise examine it, for example. More important, I *can alter the image* in the mirror by moving myself or other objects in front of or away from it. Because I can control and manipulate the images in the mirror, my perception of them must be suitably distinct, or must have suitably rich content, insofar at least as I know that *if* I move, so too will the image in the mirror. I have a privileged relation to the content reflected in the mirror; above all, I see that image *as* an image of myself. This is so far entirely uncontroversial. What I think Leibniz wants us to derive from his mirror talk, however, is the more provocative idea that what a cognizant being sees of itself in a mirror is *also* a state of the mirror, even though the mirror doesn't ‘see’ it that way. In these respects, then, bare monads are just like mirrors; insofar as they reflect or ‘contain’ content, bare monads (to adopt Wilson's observations concerning actual mirrors) ‘do not utilize information, or represent *to themselves* external reality. Rather, they *alter in response to changes in external reality,* in a regular manner intelligible to a rational mind acquainted (explicitly or habitually) with the laws of reflection. (*I* "read off" from the mirror that the cat has just jumped onto the bed; the *mirror* knows nothing of this.)’ (1999, 343).

Leibniz's use of the mirror analogy therefore conveys the idea that the same perceptual content can be found ‘in’ monads of any type, where differences in type of monad or between any two individual monads are reflected in the differing degrees to which each monad can consciously exploit the content that it expresses.[[35]](#endnote-35) This picture might lead us to suppose that the notion of ‘representation’ undergoes a gradual shift or enrichment from its application to bare monads to that of sentient monads. Bare monads ‘represent’ essentially in the sense of ‘embodying’ or ‘exemplifying,’ as a mirror represents an image, which conscious beings can be aware of and implicate in their broader perceptual lives, whereas the *mirror* cannot. As we ascend the scale of cognitive ability among monads, ‘representation’ gradually takes on an added, intensional significance, implying at least minimal awareness (sensory or cognitive); sentient monads embody this form of representation along with the notion of ‘representation’ as ‘presentation’ or ‘exemplification’ which is the sole sense of representation pertinent to bare monads.[[36]](#endnote-36) In short, the ‘flat’ perceptual reality of bare monads is developed, ordered, and expanded as more representationally complex monads are brought into that reality. It would be worthwhile to flesh out and further apply Leibniz's living mirror metaphor, specifically to ascertain how sentient and sapient monads can themselves be regarded as mirrors and what their status as such further shows about the representational character of Leibniz's ontology.[[37]](#endnote-37) But I think I have said enough here to illustrate how Leibniz might view the characteristic relation of bare monads to perceptual content, and how the perceptual reality of bare monads may coincide with, but differ paradigmatically from, the perceptual reality of more mentally sophisticated substances, by virtue of the latter’s ability to exploit the content of their perceptions and bare monads’ lack thereof. Leibniz’s views in this context clearly express parts (i*'*) and (iii*'*) of the alternative reading of Passage B proposed above.

*5.2 ‘Experiencing representationally’*

A second important indication that Leibniz espouses the flat construal of monadic perception concerns the nature of his reliance on the notion of ‘experience’. Leibniz is famous for describing sensation -- one form of experience -- as arising from an infinity of ‘minute perceptions’, each individually unconscious but together ultimately sensed by a given (sentient) monad.[[38]](#endnote-38) Yet Leibniz does not seem inclined to *define* perception strictly in terms of experience. This lack of specific treatment of the notion of experience grants some interpretive freedom, and I believe that Wilson, in this context, relies on an understanding of 'experience' that is not, or need not be seen to be, shared by Leibniz or Brandom.

In Passage B, recall, Brandom claims that each monad ‘experiences’ its perceptions, a claim Wilson finds problematic due to its implication that monads universally enjoy such experience, against what looks like Leibniz’s restriction of experience to the realm of sentient monads. Wilson’s worry, as we’ve seen, is that one simply cannot apply conceptions of consciousness and experience to bare monads in any sense, not even proleptically, since there is simply no way of talking about representation that could give us any purchase on what perception in a bare monad is like. She expresses her point in these terms: ‘bare monads do not *experience* representationally any more than they experience consciously’ (1999, 343)

Notice that the notion of ‘experiencing representationally’ seems paradoxical as applied to bare monads only if experience is thought to entail awareness or internal accessibility of content. In that case, being unable to experience representationally is tantamount to being unable to experience consciously -- indeed, Wilson in the just-quoted excerpt seems to treat the former notion as a kind of queer and inappropriate way of couching or referring to the latter notion. Her point is that denying that monads experience representationally simply follows from the denial that monads experience consciously. If x does not experience consciously, then x does not experience representationally.

The flat reading of Passage B, however, relies on a different sense of the notion of ‘experience’ that does not invite Wilson's misgivings about the unrestricted scope of the notion granted it by Brandom. On this flat account, perceptual states are ‘experienced’ insofar as they are had or undergone, as a tire might ‘experience’ a puncture. This sense of ‘experience’ intuitively seems appropriate to the case of monads, each of which is identified with a unique unfolding or succession of perceptual states that comprise its intrinsic properties: here it is natural to say that each monad *undergoes* such a succession of states, even though, as Leibniz thinks, each monad is the active source of the content each of its perceptions.[[39]](#endnote-39)

In the following passage from the *Monadology*, Leibniz seems to marshal the notion of experience in this flat sense. Although not obvious at first, his invocation of the notion of experience in this passage is probably not an appeal to the notion of ‘experience’ in the way Wilson understands it -- as consisting in or presupposing ‘internal intensionality.’ This is because what the passage says we ‘experience within ourselves’ is an *unconscious* state.

For we experience [*nous expérimentons*] within ourselves a state in which we remember nothing and have no distinct perception; this is similar to when we faint or when we are overwhelmed by a deep, dreamless sleep. In this state the soul does not differ sensibly from a simple monad; but since this state does not last, and since the soul emerges from it, our soul is something more. (AG 215)

Thus, while it may be that Leibniz occasionally uses the term ‘experience’ in a way connoting awareness, it could be argued that being in a perceptual state -- the ‘passing state which involves and represents a multitude in the unity or simple substance’ -- is fundamentally something that perpetually ‘befalls’ each monad from its own point of view, thereby serving to determine what it ‘experiences.’ Taking a broader view, there is a sense in which each monad -- bare or sentient – ‘undergoes’ the alterations and vicissitudes of the perceptible universe, though each may be more or less cognizant of its own place within this infinite scheme and comparatively active with respect to a certain segment of its monadic cohort.

These reflections shed some light on how one might interpret -- and ascribe to bare monads -- the notion of ‘experiencing representationally’: this term could be taken to mean that a monad undergoes a change consisting in an alteration of perceptual content, much as a mirror will ‘undergo’ changes in the images it reflects depending on the activity of things which alternately appear before and move away from it. In bare monads, I am proposing, such change is ‘experienced’ in the flat sense but is not apperceived and does not consist in the development of any given content as required for apperception.

There is, moreover, another way to gloss the notion of ‘experiencing representationally’ that is derived from Leibniz's explanation of sensation, which attributes a distinctly representational status to perceptions we do not apperceive. In the *New Essays* (among many other places), Leibniz insists on the representational character of minute perceptions too confused to notice individually but which collectively and incrementally produce a sensation in monads with bodies of the right type. He writes:

I would prefer to distinguish between *perception* and *being aware*. For instance, a perception of light or colour of which we are aware is made up of many minute perceptions of which we are unaware; and a noise which we perceive but do not attend to is brought within reach of our awareness by a tiny increase or addition. If the previous noise had no effect on the soul, this minute addition would have none either, nor would the total. (NE 134)

Sensation, for Leibniz, is a form of apperceiving, whereas the individual confused perceptions that act as a conglomerate to trigger a sensation are inaccessible to awareness. However, Leibniz reasons that insofar as sensation involves a distinct kind of awareness, the myriad perceptions that comprise sensation must ‘have an effect on the soul’ characteristic of perceptions: though not *separately* discernible by us, these minute perceptions are hypothesized as playing a representational role relative to the soul in that they imbue (unconscious) states with certain perceptual content. To monads that are sentient to various degrees -- and by virtue of their association with organic bodies outfitted with the right kind of sensory and intellectual equipment -- this content is exploitable in episodes of sensation and cognition. By contrast, bare monads are constitutively incapable of exploiting this content. But their failure to so exploit perceptual content does not make their operation or existence devoid of all ‘representationality.’ Bare monads, as I have proposed, relate to perceptual content -- shared by other monads -- by embodying it, and the ‘experience’ of bare monads consists in their undergoing a passage from one incarnation or expression of such content to another.

Thus, in reply to Wilson’s concern about the coherence of maintaining that bare monads ‘experience representationally,’ we may affirm that, for Leibniz’s monads, including the bare ones, *all* experiencing is ‘experiencing representationally.’ Everything that happens to a monad depends on what and how it perceives, whether consciously or unconsciously. Any experience monads may undergo will be representational (or perceptual) in nature. And I believe we are now in a position to see that, while it is true that bare monads do not ‘experience consciously,’ they can, on Leibniz's principles (and *pace* Wilson), be said to ‘experience’ -- to undergo – ‘representationally.’

***6. Last words***

If what I have argued in this essay is correct, Wilson’s animadversions against Brandom, based on the claims he appears to make in Passage B, are not ultimately compelling; in fact, Wilson’s reading of the passage obscures the profound way in which her own reading of Leibniz is consistent with Brandom’s, and might be said to enrich it. For example, the subject of the relation of perception to action (and passion) in Leibniz's monadology is treated only marginally in Brandom's account, which could surely be enhanced by integrating -- at no cost to Brandom's theory – Wilson’s view about the inferential basis of monadic action in the order of reasons in God’s mind.

In the end, interestingly enough, Brandom and Wilson seem to have the same agenda -- in Brandom’s terms, to reveal the dependence of ‘the concepts of awareness and representation on the concept of inference (even for monads incapable of thought)’ (1981, 450). Both see the proper elucidation of these Leibnizian topics to require an account of how features of the world are externally deducible from features of monads and their harmonious relations to each other (and in Wilson's case, ultimately from the order of reasons in God's mind). Wilson believes that Brandom's pursuit of this explanatory enterprise falters where ‘monads incapable of thought’ are concerned. I have tried to show otherwise, but I do not want that to be quite the end of the story. Brandom’s and Wilson’s theories of Leibnizian perception are powerful and provocative, and I think it is appropriate to close this discussion by briefly pointing out some of their relative strengths and weaknesses.

Wilson, to begin with, admits explicitly that her account ‘remains on the most schematic level’ (1999, 344). For all its brevity, however, the account both provides valuable insight and bears some instructive shortcomings. The principal virtue of Wilson’s explanation of degrees of perceptual distinctness as reflecting the order of reasons in God’s mind is its due emphasis on Leibniz’s views on action and passion. Wilson points to a slew of texts (including M §§49-56) in which Leibniz develops this connection. Furthermore, one feature of Leibniz’s treatment not emphasized in the present paper is his association of greater degrees of perceptual distinctness with greater degrees of ‘perfection.’ Brandom is certainly sensitive to this usage, but it is only on Wilson’s account, where perceptual distinctness is said to be regulated by the structure of reasons in God’s mind, that Leibniz’s peculiar invocation of the notion of perfection is of manifest relevance.

However, there are several downsides to Wilson’s positive proposal.[[40]](#endnote-40) First, on Wilson’s account it is hard to see to what extent the relative distinctness of a perception depends on something like the ‘articulation’ of its content (relative to the content of other perceptions). Surely, the distinctness of a perception ought to be determined in some fashion by the nature of its content. Further, making the distinctness of monads’ perceptual states dependent on God makes it so that relative perceptual distinctness is an extrinsic property of monads (based ultimately on their relation to God). If that isn’t objectionable in itself -- though Brandom would disagree with this result -- it is nevertheless natural to wonder how exactly we are supposed to identify the superior distinctness of a perception, if all we know is that its superior distinctness is due to the place it represents in the order of reasons in God’s mind. Finally, and most pertinent to the broader theme of this paper, how does the God’s-reasons analysis of degrees of perceptual distinctness explain the relationship between perceptual distinctness and consciousness? The answer is unclear.

An advantage of Brandom’s account, I believe, is that it does not face any of these particular difficulties. In fact (as I hope one could glean from the foregoing discussion), it could be said that the disadvantages of Wilson’s account just adumbrated correspond to relative strengths of Brandom’s account concerning these very issues. At this point, however, due diligence requires mentioning a significant liability of Brandom’s theory, pointed out, in fact, by Wilson herself, as an accompaniment to the objection we have considered in this paper concerning Brandom’s allegedly illicit appeal to internal intentionality in characterizing the perception of bare monads. Wilson’s additional criticism is that Brandom’s deployment of the notion of an ‘expressive range’ of individual perceptions ‘requires a way of distinguishing co-occurrent perceptions independent of their respective objects, which is not supplied by either Brandom or Leibniz, and ... [which] sits uneasily with Leibniz's claim that a substance always has several perceptions, each of which “enfolds an infinity”’ (1999, 343).

If I understand Wilson aright, she is objecting to Brandom’s proposal that monadic perceptions are distinguished by their expressive ranges rather than by their objects. And this seems correct: Brandom holds, as we have seen, that multiple monadic perceptions can express (say) the same physical object but are distinguished from one another by the degree of specificity of their content. However, Wilson avers, neither Brandom nor Leibniz provides a suitable justification for this proposal. Moreover, Leibniz's view that there are always several perceptions in a monad each of which ‘enfolds an infinity’ seemingly conflicts with the finiteness Brandom attributes to individual perceptions that are distinguished from one another determinately by their inferential potential.

Here is not the place for me to address this worthwhile objection.[[41]](#endnote-41) But it bears suggesting that the objection can be treated in one of two ways. Optimistically, one could say that it raises an interesting concern, the kind that invites us to probe the efficacy and flexibility of an otherwise profitable theory. However, in a less charitable vein (the one Wilson is pursuing), the objection might be seen to call into question the very motivation behind Brandom’s interpretation: the aim to elaborate the *general* relationship between inference and representation, *as* that relationship is suggestively manifested and productively developed in a historical setting, the setting of Leibniz's thought. To accept Brandom’s enterprise as an appropriate way of gaining insight into that thought, Wilson maintains, is to ill-advisedly condone a ‘reconstruction’ that amounts to ‘an attempt to make out what Leibniz *could say* about distinct perception that bears only the most tenuous connection to what he actually does say’ (1999, 341).

Brandom, for his part, puts a different spin on the task of reconstruction:

The sort of understanding that is made explicit in [conversational engagement with] the claims and texts a tradition comprises is a *critical one*. For it is manifested in the process of moving back and forth between the perspective provided by the tradition and what is true (according to the ascriber): the commitments the ascriber herself is prepared to undertake and defend. This is the form in which one engages a tradition in a dialogue aimed at deciding what commitments one ought oneself to undertake. (2002, 110)

For my part -- although I cannot defend my view here at length -- I see Brandom’s outlook as valid. And I am skeptical of the charge that in embracing the elasticity of critical engagement with philosophical tradition, in probing Leibniz’s thought to uncover and test his own commitments, Brandom runs afoul of what Leibniz ‘did say.’ Nor, further, am I convinced that Brandom’s dialogical approach must bear ‘only the most tenuous connection’ to Leibniz's actual views (as if these were transparent and uncontroversial to begin with). To do proper historical research in philosophy, Wilson urges, one must extract -- one cannot select, supplement, and approximate (see Brandom 2002, 111). But I ask: Why not?[[42]](#endnote-42)

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1. Brandom 1981 is reprinted in Brandom 2002; in this paper I shall cite the original 1981 version of his article. [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. Aside from Wilson 1999, the most extensive and illuminating engagement with Brandom's views is found in Puryear 2006; Jorgensen (2019, §1.3) offers a more recent and succinct commentary on the exchange between Brandom and Wilson. Brandom (1981) does not cite much previous work on the topic of Leibniz's theory of perceptual distinctness. However, he does explicitly engage the interpretation of Montgomery Furth (1967), who understands Leibniz's notion of perceptual distinctness in terms of distribution of consciousness. Brandom raises several important objections to Furth's account. For example, that account, according to Brandom, mistakes clarity for distinctness, essentially attributing to Leibniz the view that ‘nearest is clearest’ (purportedly stemming from Leibniz's claim in *Monadology* §60 that a monad perceives most distinctly what is nearest or greatest with respect to it.). Brandom points out that Furth's way of reading M §60 has implausible implications for bodily awareness: ‘On this [Furth's] view, if on a certain occasion I am more aware of the moon I gaze at than of the eye employed, then the moon has become part of my body, or the eye has ceased to be such a part, or both’ (Brandom 1981 452). Other authors (not mentioned by Brandom) who connect perceptual distinctness with sensation or consciousness include McRae (1976) and Parkinson (1982). Significantly, Brandom is unique among these authors in emphasizing the notion of *degrees* of perceptual distinctness; this is, in fact, a feature of Brandom’s account that Wilson (1999, 339) broadly commends. [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
3. As Brandom (2002, 91) notes autobiographically, ‘before I finished the Leibniz essay [Brandom 1981], inferentialism had not been visible to me as a possible order of explanation, never mind as one embodied in actual tradition.’ [↑](#endnote-ref-3)
4. Although interesting, the development of Brandom's inferentialism will not be my topic here. [↑](#endnote-ref-4)
5. Brandom 2002, 117. [↑](#endnote-ref-5)
6. Brandom 2002, 117. [↑](#endnote-ref-6)
7. Brandom 2002, 112. [↑](#endnote-ref-7)
8. This has the content *enabling* inference. Note that on Brandom's own view inferential relations are more fundamental than content, so the latter can’t enable the former. Here is an instance in which the Leibniz essay offers a partial foreshadowing of the Brandomian view that nevertheless departs from it. I’m indebted to Steven Gross for this observation. [↑](#endnote-ref-8)
9. As we will see by the end, Wilson (1999) levels two criticisms at Brandom. The main one studied here concerns the ‘internal accessibility’ vs. ‘external deducibility’ of monadic perceptions. A second criticism, discussed briefly at the end, targets Brandom’s assumption about how the content of Leibnizian perceptions are individuated, and at the same time questions Brandom’s historiographical approach. [↑](#endnote-ref-9)
10. Brandom’s interpretation of Leibniz’s views on perception and representation is ambitious and extraordinarily rich. Among the topics he brings up which I will *not* examine in this essay are Leibniz’s views on sensation, error, the relation between distinctness and clarity, the relation between perceptions and ideas, the nature of reasoning and definition, the preestablished harmony, rationalism (particularly as embodied in the principle of sufficient reason and the identity of indiscernibles), and (most important for Brandom), the relation between perceptual and conceptual content. [↑](#endnote-ref-10)
11. I use the following abbreviations for works of Leibniz cited in this paper: DM = *Discourse on Metaphysics*; PNG = *Principles of Nature and Grace*; M = *Monadology*; NE = *New Essays on Human Understanding*. Abbreviations to editions of Leibniz’s works are provided in the bibliography. [↑](#endnote-ref-11)
12. For a helpful overview of Leibniz's monadic hierarchy, see Simmons 2011. [↑](#endnote-ref-12)
13. See GP VI.600, 610-11. [↑](#endnote-ref-13)
14. See e.g. GP VI.611. [↑](#endnote-ref-14)
15. See M §21. [↑](#endnote-ref-15)
16. In this paragraph and the next I rely on Jorgensen’s (2019, ch. 5) helpful formulation of Leibniz's basic views on expression and perception. [↑](#endnote-ref-16)
17. For a more comprehensive list of examples, see Kulstad 1977 and Swoyer 1995. [↑](#endnote-ref-17)
18. For an interpretation of the ‘expression’ relation along these lines, see Swoyer 1995. [↑](#endnote-ref-18)
19. A point noted by Jorgensen (2015, 54). [↑](#endnote-ref-19)
20. Furth 1967 is the *locus classicus* of the interpretation on which perceptual distinctness is understood in terms of distribution of consciousness. [↑](#endnote-ref-20)
21. Simmons (2001, 60) also attributes this explanatory enterprise to Leibniz. [↑](#endnote-ref-21)
22. Brandom (1981, 460) defines an ‘accident’ as ‘any property of a subject that is not a maximal property, in the sense that it does not contain or entail all of the properties of that subject that are comprised by its individual concept.’ [↑](#endnote-ref-22)
23. A point made by Puryear (2006, 75). [↑](#endnote-ref-23)
24. Cf. Puryear 2006, 3.3.1. [↑](#endnote-ref-24)
25. That Leibniz espouses a higher-order theory of phenomenal consciousness -- according to which perceptual states become conscious by virtue of a higher-order mental act -- is the standard view among commentators. For representative readings, see Gennaro 1999 and Simmons 2001. Other commentators, however, demur; see Barth 2014 and Jorgensen 2019. [↑](#endnote-ref-25)
26. This formulation of Brandom’s definition is based on that helpfully given by Puryear 2006, 79. [↑](#endnote-ref-26)
27. For Leibniz, monads constitute organic bodies, each of which stand in a structured, expressive relationship with one another. Leibniz holds than in each organic body there is a ‘dominant’ monad which perceives the body it constitutes most distinctly. He refers to the dominant monads of organic bodies as the ‘souls’ of the latter (See M §70). [↑](#endnote-ref-27)
28. There is very good evidence that Leibniz holds this view; see M §62: ‘Thus, although each created monad represents the whole universe, it more distinctly represents the body which is particularly affected by it, and whose entelechy it constitutes. And just as this body expresses the whole universe through the interconnection of all matter in the plenum, the soul also represents the whole universe by representing this body, which belongs to it in a particular way’ (AG 221). [↑](#endnote-ref-28)
29. Leibniz’s doctrine of preestablished harmony can be partly stated as the doctrine that every created substance is preestablished or programmed so that all of its natural states conform with the natural states of every other created substance, and there is no causal interaction between any two created substances. (See Kulstad and Carlin 2013 for discussion). The nature of Leibniz’s phenomenalism is a controversial topic but is often taken to consist in the view that the only genuinely real beings are mind-like substances, with physical bodies and relations being mere “appearances.” For a particularly careful explication of the issues surrounding this view, see Adams 1994. [↑](#endnote-ref-29)
30. Cf. e.g.: ‘We may say that two perceptions differ in perceptual or expressive degree just in case the ... content of one of them properly includes the ... content of the other. Leibniz’s standard definition of perfection is that that is most perfect which is “simplest in hypotheses and richest in phenomena.” That is, one substance is more perfect than another if from fewer premises about it, more about its world can be deduced than is the case for the other. The “hypotheses” will be statements reporting the occurrence of a perception in some monad, and the “phenomena” deducible from them will be statements reporting on the inherence of an accident in some subject ...’ (Brandom 1981, 463). [↑](#endnote-ref-30)
31. This is also what Puryear (2006) understands to be the essential verdict of Wilson’s critique of Brandom. [↑](#endnote-ref-31)
32. It is worth noting that in his overview of the exchange between Brandom and Wilson, Jorgensen (2019, 124-25) presents Wilson’s interpretation of Passage B without raising the question whether there may be alternative readings of the passage. [↑](#endnote-ref-32)
33. I’m indebted to Steven Gross for initially proposing a “flat” reading of Passage B as a response to its alleged inconsistency with Brandom’s overall treatment of monadic perception. [↑](#endnote-ref-33)
34. At this point it should be noted that Wilson evidently misinterprets Brandom’s use of the term ‘intensional’ in taking the term to denote ‘internally accessible,’ or as connected with the experiential feature of representation. It seems to me more than likely that Brandom uses the term ‘intensional’ in the way that Leibniz properly does, viz., as denoting a logical feature of predicates that involves the specification of conceptual content. Here the notion of an ‘intension’ is contrasted with that of an ‘extension’. As Leibniz illustrates the contrast in the *New Essays*:

    For when I say *Every man is an animal* I mean that all the men are included amongst all the animals; but at the same time I mean that the idea of animal is included in the idea of man. ‘Animal’ comprises more individuals than ‘man’ does, but ‘man’ comprises more ideas or more attributes: one has more instances, the other more degrees of reality; one has the greater extension, the other the greater intension. (NE 486)

    The greater the intension of a term or concept, in other words, the richer or more specific its conceptual content. This notion is important to Brandom, for whom, as we have seen, the relative distinctness of a perception is a function of the relative specificity of its content. The greater the extent to which a perception’s content is specified, the greater the extent to which it is possible to make inferences from that content to features of things in the world (e.g. being able, on the basis of perceiving something as a red square, to distinguish the latter thing from a red sphere or a green cube). Thus, in one place, Brandom summarizes the background assumption behind his major interpretive suggestion about the distinctness of monadic perception as follows: ‘... degrees of perception … correspond to more-or-less-in-one, where … following Leibniz’s intensional logic, increasing the number of accidents attributed to a subject amounts to specifying one’s claim’ (1981, 466). This point is important, for if correct, it seems that Brandom is truly invoking *external deducibility* -- the logical or inferential articulation of perceptual content -- just where Wilson takes him to be appealing to or mentioning the internal accessibility of perceptions. While I think one could seriously call into question the efficacy of Wilson’s critique of Brandom based on these semantic considerations, I will not be resting my defense of Brandom on them. [↑](#endnote-ref-34)
35. In speaking of perceptual states being ‘had’ by the mirror, we are not forced to attribute to the mirror a ‘unity of consciousness.’ Wilson (1999, 343) correctly points out that Leibniz’s official definition of perception as the ‘expression of many in one’ says nothing about ‘the many’ (representations) *being* *internal to* the one (i.e. represented in a single consciousness); all it directly implies is that in perception, many are expressed *as a unity*. [↑](#endnote-ref-35)
36. In claiming that Leibniz’s mirror analogy indicates his espousal of the equivalence of degrees of distinctness with degrees of conscious exploitability, I do not mean to imply that ‘exploiting’ content consciously means exploiting it rationally. The point is that, like Leibniz’s notion of perceptual distinctness, conscious exploitability comes in degrees, so that (e.g.) an animal’s sensory experiences and limited capacities of recognition and discrimination would count as some form of conscious (apperceptive) exploitation of perceptual content, even though the animal may lack the ability to exploit or implicate the content of its perceptions in activities involving (say) self-awareness. [↑](#endnote-ref-36)
37. For a recent and detailed treatment of Leibniz’s notion of monads as living mirrors, see Nachtomy 2019. [↑](#endnote-ref-37)
38. For an influential account of Leibniz’s notion of sensation, see Simmons 2001. [↑](#endnote-ref-38)
39. Cf. NE 86, where Leibniz describes thoughts as actions. [↑](#endnote-ref-39)
40. Wilson (1999, 344) explicitly admits these downsides. [↑](#endnote-ref-40)
41. I do believe that Brandom has a rather straightforward response to this second of Wilson’s objections. Faced with Wilson’s presumption that the individuation of monadic perceptions must depend on their objects (rather than their inferential potential), Brandom could point to M §60 as providing evidence that his account of the individuation of monadic perceptual content is expressly underwritten by the nature of Leibniz’s claims about the we may regard monads as ‘limited’: ‘Monads are limited, *not as to their object*s, but with respect to the modifications of their knowledge of them. Monads all go confusedly to infinity, to the whole; *but they are limited and differentiated by the degrees of their distinct perceptions*’ (my emphases). [↑](#endnote-ref-41)
42. Thanks to Steven Gross and to two anonymous referees for *PPQ* for their most helpful suggestions on earlier drafts of this paper. I dedicate this paper to Michael Della Rocca and Ken Winkler, whose value as teachers and scholars I perceive with utmost distinctness. [↑](#endnote-ref-42)