

## Filosofijos istorija

# BEFORE OBJECTIVITY: THE CONCEPT OF DISTRIBUTIVE KNOWLEDGE IN EARLY MODERN METAPHYSICS\*

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**Abstract.** *The paper discusses the concept of distribution of ideas and, accordingly, of knowledge, which can be found in the early modern metaphysics. This concept was not completely developed and was overshadowed by the concept of objectivity. An attempt to formalize the distributivity is made. The role played by the idea of distributive knowledge in pre-Kantian metaphysics is demonstrated with a special attention to Leibniz's doctrine. We argue, that the events of communication between individuals are based on points of distributive knowledge.*

**Keywords:** *distributive knowledge, Descartes, Leibniz, Kant, early modern philosophy, objectivity*

There is a strange trait in Cartesian construction of *cogito* which can be described as the intrinsic property of Early Modern thinking. This trait is the question of who can appropriate the thesis “*ego cogito*” (*I think*)? Descartes himself explains it in the following way: everyone who decides to devote their whole life to scientific investigations can. This ego, on the one hand, has no personal, or singular character, on the other hand, it is not universal either. Indeed, Locke's criticism of *idea innata* demonstrates that not everyone capable of thinking will agree with the proposition “*cogito ergo sum*”; and Leibniz's remark

that “*I think*” is not the truth of reason but the first truth of fact, points out that the necessity of *ego cogito* has moral, not metaphysical, certainty (Leibniz 1875–90: 7, 319). Therefore, the statement “I think, therefore I am” demonstrates not only the existence of the “subject”, but the existence of phenomena as well. In Leibniz's doctrine, phenomena do not acquire a confirmation of their existence from the cognition of the thinking ego. Leibniz's reading of *cogito* differs from the post-Hegelian tradition of history of philosophy, where Cartesian doctrine is the most powerful foundation of thinking ego autonomy. As the subject matter of this paper is determined by the preference of Leibniz's reading, it is nec-

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essary then that the preference should be explained.

Scientific activity of thinking, as it was conceived by Descartes, can be performed by anyone who meets the following requirements: one has natural light of reason (*lumen naturale*), and has an interest in scientific knowledge. Therefore, ego in the formula “*ego cogito*” is an excessive element. I think, as well as anyone does, who meets the set requirements and has undergone the painful procedure of identification through radical doubt; that is, he has renounced all his past, bodily skills and learning, and thereby has gained a new understanding of himself<sup>1</sup>. But if we, following Leibniz, reject the ontological preference of verifying *cogito*, then we will not suppose the existence of any subject of thinking, which is one for every thinking person. Here the point of tension lies: the subject of thinking is not universal, but it also has no usual empirical individuality. Hence, here we have to go beyond the opposition empirical and transcendental, and investigate the dimensions of subjectivity.

## The Concept of Distributive Knowledge

The topic of our paper requires a preliminary demonstration, for which it is convenient to use a general example. Thus, if both

I and somebody else have an apple, and we exchange them, then each of us will have one apple. But if we, each of us have a file, then, after the exchange, each of us will get two files. This example demonstrates that an apple and a file, in this case, possess different types of distributivity: an apple cannot be distributed between two (or several) persons, whereas we can easily distribute a file. It is also easy to see that the point is not the nature of an apple or a file: we can admire the perfect form of an apple together with somebody, whereas, sometimes you need to own a file entirely on your own. Our task in this paper is not to specify the classification of things relevant to a particular method of distribution, but to propose the logical division of distributivity: what classes this very ability of items (or ideas) to be shared can be divided into? It is necessary to observe that the customary subject/object division cannot be relevant here: the subject (person) of distributivity is not actually alone, its (subject's) multiplicity is not presented, whereas distributivity belongs not to an object, but to circumstances, where thing(s) can be recognized as presented by one or a set of persons.

This property of distributivity can be applied to knowledge. The distributivity of knowledge determines the collective character of the early modern science: everyone can possess knowledge, everyone is able to increase or decrease it and, and this is especially important here, everyone can be qualified as an owner of knowledge. One cannot, therefore, *have* knowledge, one can just somehow *share* it. Knowledge cannot be unshared, the circulation of knowledge is its indispensable condition. However, due to the fact that every knowledge is distributed,

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<sup>1</sup> Cf. McRae's suggestion between Cartesian and Leibnitian concept of I in the *cogito*: “Descartes after establishing that he is a thinking thing goes on to consider his ideas of other things, among which are to be found the ideas of men similar to himself. It is only as a result of having the idea ‘which represents me to myself’ that he is able ‘to form’ ideas representing ‘men similar to myself’. But, for Leibniz, the idea of myself is at the same time the idea of other selves. The I is necessarily conceived as being one among many who can say ‘I’” (McRae 1982: 82).

it does not follow that every knowledge is distributed universally. (Here “to distribute” and “to share” is the same action). The division of distributive knowledge can be constructed upon various grounds, and first of all — it can be constructed according to the degree of generality.

*Singular distribution.* If I have a recurrent dream and I cannot describe it, just because I do not remember it, but every time I see it I realize that I have seen it already, then this type of knowledge is a distributed one. It circulates between the previous and the present dreamers. The measure of distributivity of this knowledge is minimal: it is hard, or even impossible to demonstrate the conditions of obtaining it. Nevertheless, as in the dream, there is still the possibility to fix: I have seen it before and I see it again, I find myself as the recipient of the same knowledge. This kind of knowledge we can designate as the knowledge of singular distribution. Singular here does not mean unique, singularity indicates some dynamics, distributivity in this case, as mathematicians say, *tends* to singularity.

*Universal distribution.* On the contrary, such knowledge as “one kilometer contains 1000 meters” or “act only according to that maxim whereby you can at the same time will that it should become a universal law without contradiction” tends to be distributed among the maximum number of rational beings. We have to observe here, that the distributive description of knowledge is irrelevant to the truth of knowledge. I guess every human being does not follow categorical imperative, but, if I agree with Kant and recognize my own freedom, then I become an agent of the universal distribution of this concept of freedom. Or the concept of infinitesimal, as Leibniz said, is

a fiction, but it is a useful fiction. Therefore, everyone who has learnt the methods of this type of counting is able to use it. There are no obvious obstacles to learn these methods, and, until such obstacles are found, the idea of infinitesimal belongs (or tends) to universal distribution.

*Particular distribution.* Sometimes knowledge, in order to remain knowledge, should set limits to itself. Apparently, secrets belong to this class of distribution: a secret cannot be known by one person only, because knowledge is circulation. And secret cannot be known by everyone. We can distinguish a secret from a mystery. The latter may “belong” to someone alone. But mystery is rather a form of ignorance than something certain. There is an affinity between mystery and oblivion. Both are actions of hidden, vague distributivity, because those, to whom a mystery was revealed, cannot be sure that they know it fully. The example of such a vague distributivity are Nicolaus Cusanus’ mathematical games with infinity. A mystery is sweet when its action gives an idea of superiority to its vague agent, and it is agonizing when action without witness or resistance cannot be performed.

The element of knowledge in the early modern metaphysics is an idea. The modern concept of idea is well known, here we will use this term in the sense which was developed by Leibniz in his small work “What is an Idea” (Leibniz 1978b: 263–264), that is, an idea is an expression of a thing. Although there may be dissimilarity between an idea and a thing, yet an idea expresses something, which is not an idea, so that to handle expressions is the same as to handle things.

Kant suggests that not every idea has certain distribution, when he compares Pla-

to's philosophy with a pigeon trying to fly in vacuum (Kant 1998: 129). Just as wings devoid of resistance and support of air are not able to fly, likewise those who do not undergo experience, are deprived of certainty of knowledge. It should be remarked here that Kantian concept of critique of reason's claims can be described in terms of distribution of knowledge as follows. Although the truth has universal distribution, still the distributivity of speculative knowledge is limited, and this limitation is double: contemplation without concepts (the emptiness of contemplation) and concepts without contemplations (blindness of concepts). Our task is to delineate the scale of distributivity and to demonstrate how various forms of distributivity reveal themselves in the early modern metaphysics.

In the texts of the early modern thinkers we do not come across the term "distributive knowledge", although Hobbes wrote on distributive justice somewhat critically (i.e. the justice of a judge, delivering rewards according to merits) and distinguished it from the commutative justice (Hobbes 1994: 102), that is, from the equity of exchange<sup>2</sup>. But we can find a lot of examples which demonstrate the distributive nature of knowledge. In this way, Leibniz formulates an axiom (Leibniz 1875–90: 7, 230): "If something is taken with itself, then nothing new is composed, i.e.  $A + A \infty A$ " (where

$\infty$  is the sign of identity). This should be distinguished from the usual way of counting, where  $1 + 1 = 2$ . If we compare these two statements, then we will see that as  $A$  in the first proposition is not a variable, so the left 1 in the second proposition is not the same as the right one: both units designate something different. One sign for different things can exist in the case when referents have something in common. Then, if we take this "common" as something real, then the argument of a third man is valid and we could not perform counting. But this distributive *ens* (the idea) is not nothing, because in our comparison of two propositions we see the very difference of the two classes of distributivity.

However, the degree of community is not the only possible division of distributivity. The distributivity of an idea depends not only on how many agents can share it, but also on how long the idea can be shared, that is treated as true or useful.

There are some short-term distributions. For example, when I woke up at midnight and wrote down the dream, I was sure that I had described the entire dream. Nevertheless, the next morning, and a long time after, I failed to retrieve what I had dreamed. This type of messages can be called *zero distribution* (but we cannot consider it senseless, for we have the memory of the significance of it, and there is still a possibility that this messages will be decoded). The idea of zero distribution has its own dynamics, but it is of a special sort: it strives to leave its own class. Thus, the idea of salvation seems to belong to the universal distribution, but we have to qualify it as zero: it strives to become universal, when one (i.e. a neophyte) seeks to salvage everybody, or — *negative*, when everything inconsistent with the

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<sup>2</sup> A. V. Prokofiev (2011) points out, that the concept of distributive justice in the early modern ethics is replaced by anti-distributive justice. Williams (2010) insists to the contrary that Kant returns to the notion of distributive justice. Indeed, the concept of distributive justice disappears from ethical treatises of that period, but, according to our assumption, the basis of this process is the fact that the concept of distributiveness covers broader areas: we meet it in the context of scientific research of nature, as well as in metaphysics.

project of salvation is rejected as harmful or insipid.

There is also knowledge with *delayed* distribution (knowledge which can be assimilated under some conditions that currently are not feasible), or with *negative* distribution: Nietzsche wrote that his books spoil the taste, because after reading them all the rest seem insipid, or dull. The example of the negative distribution is vast memory, which prevents us from getting acquainted with something new. We know with negative distribution, when the ability to share is decreasing after we have encountered something disgusting, or, on the contrary, intense love can limit horizons. Leibniz called this class of distributivity *petites perceptions*, or a series of small perceptions which deprive us of the possibility to perceive the whole of the variety, making us to either faint or fall under illusion.

The negative distribution can also be specified. Thus, forgetting the right word or name and then remembering it is an example of *singular negative distribution*: it prevents knowledge from explication, just not allowing to make a single necessary step. But inaccuracies and distortions caused, according to Bacon, by the idols of knowledge, that is, by those preferences, which are not easy to eliminate (or even impossible to eliminate completely), is the knowledge of *particular negative distribution*. Although, everyone is exposed to idols' influences, this distributivity is yet particular, because its influences can be neutralized. And only those ideas that give rise to skepticism (even such optimistic kind as the skepticism of Hume or Leibniz), followed by a number as a universal distribution of knowledge negative), should be understood as a *negative universal distribution* of knowledge. If we

admit that distribution (*D*) is universal (*U*), particular (*P*), zero (*0*) and negative (-), then we get the scale of distributivity. In order to demonstrate cases when the distributivity is a working concept, we have to take into account the following considerations.

If it is given that some distributed knowledge is defined by characteristics *a*, *b*, *c*, then *UD* can be achieved not only by the amount *UD(a)*, *UD(b)*, *UD(c)*, but also by *PD(a)*, *PD(b)*, *PD(c)*, because the demonstration of the class of any idea does not belong to the idea itself, and it cannot be shown in every discourse. For example, if only three people of a hundred know how to use the watch, and only one of them can tell time, another one can wear the watch on the wrist, and the third one knows how to wind it up, then it is enough to conclude that the idea of mechanical wristwatch belongs to the universal class of distribution.

It is also clear that, in our example, *a*, *b*, and *c* should be compossible to define a universal distributivity. If at least one of the characteristics is not compossible with the others, then we receive a formula of particular distribution:  $PD(a, b, c) \leftarrow \sim(a \& b) \vee \sim(b \& c) \vee \sim(a \& c)$ . An example of negative distribution, as we said already, is strong love, when choosing one object from a number of them is followed by rejecting all similar objects. Therefore, a set of (*a*<sub>1</sub>, *b*<sub>1</sub>, *c*<sub>1</sub>) defines *-PD*, if assertion of *a* leads to rejecting *a*<sub>2</sub>, *a*<sub>3</sub>, *a*<sub>n</sub>. Accordingly, a joy of cognition, which leads to a sequence of new discoveries can be described as  $PD(a, b) \rightarrow PD(a, b, c \dots n)$ .

### Dynamic Character of Distributive Knowledge

Philosophical knowledge has positive dynamics of distributivity, if you desire and

can share what you know. But desire is not the only point. Philosophy is a clarification of the already known. This clarification is possible only in the situation of communication, whether with other people or with oneself. There is no knowledge without distribution, but we cannot claim that communication produces knowledge. If knowledge is its explication (or complication), i.e. knowledge is its dynamics, then it is not knowledge that distributes itself between those who know; on the contrary, the distribution of knowledge produces those who know and creates a situation of communication. If we admit that the “union” of communication is something real, then we make rash action, as in Leibniz’ example of adding units. The beginning of a communicative act is the already distributed knowledge, and this distributivity has its own character, which is independent of communicators’ intentions.

Distribution is not the result of communication, on the contrary, distribution is the condition of “real” communication. Since knowledge is already distributed, so communication in several points is saturated. Gilles Deleuze calls these points “points of singularity”, and he suggests that in these points, or through them, every clear perception is performed. Indeed, how an infinite number of *petites* (unconscious) perceptions results in clear and distinct perception? A simple accumulation, or adding up, will have no effect, because every unconscious perception already contains an infinite number of small perceptions. But, at some point, perception becomes conscious, inaudible sounds of water droplets join into the noise of the sea: “The answer is that I reach the neighborhood of a remarkable point, so I do not operate a totalization, but rather a

singularization. It’s when the series of minute perceived drops of water approaches or enters into the neighborhood of a singular point, a remarkable point, that perception becomes conscious” (Deleuze 1980).

Leibniz himself compares these points with veins in marble: if an artist faithfully follows them, he can reveal a statue concealed in a block. These veins are like the streaks of reality. Thus, Leibniz proposes to understand innate ideas not as acts, acting (in us) independently from our will, but as the inclinations that can be evident in the diversity and abundance of practices: the inclinations can be revealed or may remain hidden.

The notion of communication implies that at least two individuals have some regularity, torn by set of singularities. But, if we take into account that the principle of individuation is not the location of the body in space (which is nothing more than a well-founded (*bene fundatum*) phenomenon), but the total account (performed by God), that is, the maximum of distribution, it becomes clear that communication is not an initial (or projective) action. There are distributed singularities which form individuals. Communication is just a way to singularity. That is why to strive towards the universal distributivity of every true idea is to produce nonsense. No contingent truth presented in the form *S is P* can be accepted by *all* thinking beings, if *P* does not coincide, after performed infinite analysis, with *S*. But even in this case, what we will get will be not the universal truth, but the content of all the world, regarded from one of the possible perspectives.

Distribution does not embrace any set of subjects, it is a drive (Leibniz calls it *conatus*). And it can be argued that there are

“back” and “front” borders of distributivity. Back border is *a priori* notions. Once we accept any universal *a priori*, then the dynamics of the concept, and subsequently such certainty of knowledge as distributivity, should be replaced by something else.

The front border of distributivity is also the knowledge without any dynamics. Secrets, which have lost their significance, or false “self-evidences”. Francis Bacon’s idols are nothing more than dead zones of knowledge, here it cannot circulate. Of course, one can share idols, but we deal here with a vague way of distribution, the same unclassified distributivity in every class of idols. In the *New Atlantis* Bacon builds a model of science, in which knowledge is distributed in a perfect way. It is not transferred from a teacher to a student, it is rather divided into fractions of perfect circulation: some scholars produce experience, others collect secrets, the third do the “harvesting”. Science becomes an industry of knowledge, when knowledge is not the Truth, which is expressed by an adept, who has taken good care of himself. Idols disturb the process of knowledge circulation in this scientific society. The most effective protection from the actions of idols in the modern science is an average experience, eliminating the uniqueness of bodily skills and unique individual characteristics. The power of the new knowledge is not that it brings the benefit, but that it lasts, and lasts longer than an individual life. Thus, the borders of distributivity are the limits of these duration.

Nevertheless, the borders of distributivity are a precious resource. The task of thinking, from the beginning of Modernity, is to learn how to approach distributive ideas of positive series (singular, particular,

universal) *and* with negative distributivity. Idols are not vacuousness, they are points of oblivion, vague points of discreteness in a continuum of circulating knowledge. Since idols are an inevitable element of knowledge, they are useful for it: knowledge here finds obstacles, and either overcomes them or defines its own limits, that is, idols give evidence to the power of knowledge. Bacon, Descartes, Spinoza and Leibniz — each of them offered his own strategy for dealing with indistinct knowledge. Hobbes, on the contrary, goes back to the medieval model when describing the power of knowledge: power circulates as a well-tuned hierarchy of fear, this hierarchy is universal and needs only a regulation, but not in the distribution — the fear is not shared just because everyone already has fear. Fear, unlike knowledge, has no universal distribution, it is rather some sort of *a priori*.

Distributivity can be compared to the rotation of a plane cutting the cone. As the sequence of its movement creates completely different shapes: a circle, an oval, a parabola and a hyperbola, so the sequence of the transition from the positive types of distributivity to the negative ones will demonstrate different and irreconcilable positions. In mathematics Pascal was able to show the emergence of all the mentioned figures as a result of rotation by bringing in the ideas of numerical infinity. In the early modern metaphysics different ways of distribution of knowledge were brought to unity by the metaphysical concept of infinity. The last remark requires clarification. Let us appeal to Leibniz’ doctrine. Does relation between man and God refer to the zero distribution, or does it belong to the universal one, and therefore Kant<sup>3</sup> is right in his effort to limit

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<sup>3</sup> On differences between Leibniz’s and Kant’s interpretation of the *a priori*, see Burge (2000: 15).

the claim to universality of this doctrine? Is it that monadology is the most “dogmatic metaphysics” which is to be replaced by critical philosophy?

## Conclusion

The formula “as though only God and it existed in the world” was suggested by Leibniz in his letter to Antoine Arnauld (Leibniz 1978a: 57). It means that every monad is an independent world. But it also means that there is a preference of God before any other being: if you wish to share something, then God is enough. Also this preference (*potius*) is found in the formula of superiority of being over nothing. Our interest is not the ontology of the *potius*, but the possibility to apprehend it. The question, which expresses this preference, is not “does God share something with you, when you think in such a manner”, but rather “is the concept of this being compossible with the general order of the universe”. For example, if you prefer Locke’s argument to the Cartesian, then you are an empiricist rather than a rationalist, and such identification is a particular distributivity: it imposes certain obligations on you, gives certain features, benefits, limitations, and so on. But if you prefer God to anything, then this leaves you alone with yourself, and you have not known this self before. To know yourself – it is not a general requirement, based on the fact that we should pay attention to *a priori*, which acts in every being. Innate truth is not an action, it is rather “inclinations, dispositions, habits, or natural potentialities” (Leibniz 1896: 46). Therefore, the knowledge of real being is an action rather fortunate than necessary. To know real being is to know its complete concept (i.e. all predicates of

the subject). What is *res*, or real being — is a Cartesian question. Leibniz’s answer is skeptical: if *ego cogito* is the truth of fact, but not of necessity, then we cannot distinguish real phenomena from imaginary with metaphysical certainty. And even: “for what if our nature happened to be incapable of real phenomena?” (Leibniz 1969: 364). Every perception is a bit of luck, exceeding the natural order. And in every perception there are the points of distributivity, which have moral and not metaphysical (geometrical) necessity.

Leibniz saw the way out of this unstable state in his conception of a universal language, in the project of *universal characteristics*, which remained unfinished. Kant found another solution, in the concepts of communication and objectivity: “The touchstone of whether taking something to be true is conviction or mere persuasion is therefore, externally, the possibility of communicating it and finding it to be valid for the reason of every human being to take it to be true; for in that case there is at least a presumption that the ground of the agreement of all judgments, regardless of the difference among the subjects, rests on the common ground, namely the object with which they therefore all agree and through which the truth of the judgment is proved” (Kant 1998: 685). Objectivity is the demand of universal judgment, and only one, universal form of distributivity can be recognized as knowledge, all other should be appreciate as opinion or believe (ibid.: 686). Kant’s notion of objectivity later will be reinterpreted in terms of quantitative and qualitative referents (Cf. Shipovalova 2014). But the early modern concept of distributivity was not completely developed, and was overshadowed by the notion of objectivity.

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## IKI OBJEKTYVUMO: DISTRIBUTYVAUS ŽINOJIMO SĄVOKA NAUJŪJŪ LAIKŪ METAFIZIKOJE

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**Santrauka.** Straipsnyje analizuojama idėjų ir žinojimo distributyvumo sąvoka, aptinkama ankstyvoje Naujųjų laikų metafizikoje. Ši sąvoka nebuvo iki galo išplėtota, ją užgožė objektyvumo sąvoka. Pateikiamas bandymas formalizuoti distributyvumą ir jo savybes. Atskleidžiamas distributyvus pažinimas iki-kantiškoje metafizikoje, ypatingą dėmesį skiriant Leibnizo mokymui. Straipsnio autoriai teigia, jog individų bendravimo įvykiai yra paremti distributyvus pažinimo taškais.

**Pagrindiniai žodžiai:** distributyvus pažinimas, Descartes, Leibniz, Kant, ankstyvoji Naujųjų laikų filosofija, objektyvumas

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