

The World, Seen From Within—Three Essays on Metaphysics and Meaning

Per Aage Brandt

Case Western Reserve University, USA

These short essays reflect an exploration of a question that has intrigued me for quite some time, namely why—in modern and contemporary thinking and research—the reference to the founders of modern rationality, especially Descartes, Spinoza, and Leibniz, is still so uncertain, timid, vague, even in scholarly contexts, and why the issue of ontological monism versus dualism keeps coming up in everyday debate involving matter, mind, consciousness, and meaning. Are we at all some sorts of rationalists today, in our quest for knowledge in general and for a general view of how reality works? I do not see any viable alternative to rationalistic views, and therefore find it urgent to better understand what such rationalism(s) may mean and have meant.

In what follows, I hope to offer a new perspective on some core ideas of classical rationalism—subject and object, God and world, truth and meaning—and on the afterlife of these ideas in the forms of thinking that characterize the metaphysical atmospheres, the epistemic spheres, in which we are now intellectually living and breathing.

In the first of these essays, I will critically approach the Spinozist motive in current cognitive research. I will mention the problematic role of that motive in the conception of mind and meaning. In the second essay, I will present my attempt at grasping the ontological question involved, namely the question of characterizing the sorts or levels of reality in which we live, or as the phenomenological attitude adopted invites me to say, the ontological architecture of *the world seen from within*. I will then, in the third and final essay, compare this “intrinsic world view” with the views of the classical rationalists’ and, for this purpose, at some length read and discuss Descartes’ *Meditations*, Spinoza’s *Ethics*, and Leibniz’ *Monadology*. My readings and critical comments will be aiming at finally outlining a core structure that would represent an ontological model of Rationalism, as we know it and still live in it. This metaphysical model can be varied in as many ways as there are directions in any “rational” study of mind and meaning, be it in philosophy, in semiotics, in linguistics, or in cognitive research. But if I am right, the core relations defining the model will still hold, unless they are addressed directly and explicitly modified.