Final: Monday, May 2, 2011

Samuel Beckett's Theater of Nature and Art[1]

By

NAOYA MORI (KOBE)

Résumé

Samuel Beckett (Foxrock, Dublin, 1906 - Paris, 1989) est un écrivain, poète et dramaturge irlandais d'expressions anglaise et française. La métaphysique de Leibniz a fourni un cadre d'une importance cruciale pour les œuvres de Beckett. Adaptant les concepts des monades sans fenêtres et de l'harmonie préétablie d'une manière unique, Beckett a fait renaître la métaphysique de Leibniz, en particulier, pour le théâtre du XXème siècle.

1 Beckett's Windowless Windows

From 1671 until his late years, Leibniz had cherished a magnificent plan of establishing a theatre of nature and art, which comprises a "chamber of the arts, curiosities, paintings and anatomy, […] to receive living impressions and knowledge of all things."[2] Horst Bredekamp points out that the key epistemological notion that Leibniz had for the theatre (and the idea of a picture of Atlas) is that "humans require a pictorial image to form something new and to classify" (p. 215), and that pictures are "imprinted more forcefully on the mind" (p. 216). "This theory is in sharp conflict," Bredekamp continues, "with Leibniz's thesis of monads having no windows and thus not being able to be the objects of imprints."

Samuel Beckett's theatre produces more harmony with Leibniz's metaphysics than does Leibniz's own theatre. For, while Beckett has used a number of philosophical images in his works (for example, Pythagoras, Manichaeism, Berkeley, Descartes, Geulincx, Schopenhauer, and Bergson),[3] I consider it was Leibniz who provided the fundamental framework of Beckett's works; the *windowless* monads.

Samuel Barclay Beckett was born in a Protestant family in a suburb of Dublin in 1906 and died in Paris in 1989. He was a poet, novelist, critic, playwright, director of his own plays and TV dramas, and winner of the Nobel Prize for literature in 1969. He was a bilingual writer. He wrote novels such as *Murphy* and *Watt* first in English, then, translated them into French. As for *Molloy*, *Malone meurt*, *L'Innommable*, he wrote first in French, and then into English. Probably, he is best known for his plays, especially *En attendant Godot / Waiting for Godot* (1953), and *Fin de partie / Endgame* (1957).

1 I am grateful to the Estate of Samuel Beckett for the generous permission to quote from Beckett's manuscripts, held at the Trinity College Dublin and the Library of Reading University. Also, my thanks go to Japan Society for the Promotion Science, for this research was supported by a grant from JSPS *Kakenhi* (20520311).

2 Quoted from H. Bredekamp, "Leibniz's Theater of Nature and Art," in *The Artificial and the Natural: An Evolving Polarity*, ed. by B. Bensaude-Vincent and W. R. Newman, Massachusetts: The MIT, 2007. See H. Bredekamp, *Die Fenster der Monade: Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz' Theater der Natur und Kunst*, Zweite Auflage, Berlin: Akademie, 2008, p. 24.

3 See A. Uhlmann's informative analysis in his *Samuel Beckett and the Philosophical Images*, Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2006.

Not formally trained in philosophy, Beckett studied French and Italian at Trinity College Dublin. He became a lecturer there in 1930, but resigned in January of 1932, because he wanted to become a writer. He sent a letter of resignation to his colleague instead of a Christmas card, from Kassell in Germany. He had already published a poem on Descartes's life, *Whoroscope*, and his first essay, "Dante… Bruno. Vico.. Joyce" in 1929, and *Proust* in 1930. But this young would-be writer felt keen necessity to educate himself in the history of literature, philosophy, psychology, and art. He read books in the library from which he resigned. In the early 1930s, Beckett devoted himself to the history of philosophy, reading and taking extended notes on Archibald Alexander's *A Short History of Philosophy* [*SHP*], and Wilhelm Windelband's *A History of Philosophy* [*HP*], and John Burnet's *Greek Philosophy: Thales to Plato* [*GPTP*] [4], and so on. Recent Beckett studies have cast light upon these notebooks, especially one with 267 pages, that is called "Philosophy Notes" ["PN"] (TCD MS 10967) held at Trinity College Dublin. It is noteworthy that Beckett then read Geulincx's *Ethica*, Leibniz's *Monadologie*, and Spinoza's *Ethica* in Latin and French.

Back to the motif of Beckett's "windowless monads," Beckett, in the early 1930s, quoted the following passage almost verbatim from Windelband into his notebook: "The monads 'have no windows,' and this '*windowlessness'* is to a certain extent the expression of their "metaphysical impenetrability" (*HP*, 423; Beckett, "PN," 191). Probably, Beckett construed the idea of monads having no windows as the basic premise of humanity's isolation from one another, and adapted the idea in his novels and plays. Thus, on the stage of Beckett's theatre, we find monads without means for communication. Even though they may exchange their words, their odd conversation makes them feel no less isolated than their soliloquy does.

Intriguingly, Beckett has given a shape to Leibniz's windowless monad, by installing a mysterious window into the closed room. The window appears open to the outer world, and yet, it is actually closed, viewless, thus representing the absolute predicament of protagonist in solitude. From "a small frosted skylight" of Murphy's attic – which Beckett compared to Leibniz's "mansard" in Hanover in *Murphy* (1938) – to the last one high window that "was not made to open" in *Stirrings Still* (1988), they are all windowless windows. This hypothesis is confirmed in an early manuscript of *Stirrings Still* that unveils Leibniz's metaphysics: "So dark in his windowless self that no knowing whether day or night."[5] Clearly, Beckett's closed room with its closed and viewless window is the visualization of protagonist's closed mental sphere, that is, the dramatized *windowlessness*.[6]

2 The Pre-established Harmony: Beckett's Clocks and Choirs

If the monads are windowless, and absolutely isolated and independent, how are they related? Leibniz accounts for their relation through the doctrine of the pre-established harmony, using the analogy of two clocks. Beckett knew that Leibniz's analogy of two clocks was originally derived

4 A. Alexander, *A Short History of Philosophy* [*HP*], 3rd ed. (Glasgow: Maclehose, Jackson, 1922); W. Windelband, *A History of Philosophy* [*HP*], 2nd ed., tr. James H. Tufts (1901; New York: Macmillan, 1907). J. Burnet, *Greek Philosophy: Thales to Plato* [*GPTP*] (London: Macmillan, 1950) are used in this paper respectively.

5 In translating *Murphy* into French, Beckett added a passage that does not appear in the original English *Murphy*: «Murphy avait occupé à Hanovre, assez longtemps pour faire l'expérience de tous ses avantages, une mansarde dans la belle maison renaissance de la Schmiedestrasse où avait vécu, mais surtout où était mort, Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz.» (Beckett, *Murphy*, Paris : Minuit, 1938), p. 119. For further details about Beckett's "windowless windows," see N. Mori, "Beckett's Windows and the Windowless Self," in *Samuel Beckett Today/Aujourd'hui* [*SBT/A*]*,* vol. 14, "After Beckett / D'après Beckett," ed. Anthony Uhlmann, Sjef Houppermans and Bruno Clément (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2004), pp. 357-370.

6 Regarding the question why the names of Beckett's characters often have the initial letter 'M' (Murphy, Molloy, Malone, Macman, Moll, Mahood, and May, etc.), there are many theories. Perhaps, to add another, Beckett might have named them after "monads."

from Geulincx. Beckett copied the following passage of Windelband almost literally: "Geulincx expresses himself most clearly in the illustration of the clocks as two clocks which have been made alike by the same artificer continue to move in perfect harmony" (Windelband, *HP*, 415; Beckett, "PN," 189).

However, something is wrong about the clocks and their harmony in Beckett's theater. In general, dialogue is odd and confused. Also, symbolically, Pozzo loses his chronometer in Act II of *Wating for Godot*; Winnie's alarm-clock disturbs her sleep and tortures her in *Happy Days*; and Clov's alarm-clock does not work well in *Endgame*:

> **HAMM**: Is it working? *(Pause. Impatiently.)* The alarm, is it working?
> **CLOV**: Why wouldn't it be working?
> **HAMM**: Because it's worked too much.
> **CLOV**: But it's hardly worked at all.[7]

Metaphysically, this discordance of Beckett's clocks suggests the theological problems of God's omnipotence, insufficiency, and the absence of the clockmaker.

Beckett also uses Leibniz's choir analogies. *Play* (1963) is a play in two acts about a man and two women (M, W1, W2) who had been in a lovers' triangle and who remain so in their afterlife. Far from being a melodrama, *Play* is a remarkable piece in terms of Beckett's dramatic experiments with light and sound, his avid pursuit of the artistic and philosophical expressions, and, above all, his creating discord in the pre-established harmony. Encased in juxtaposed urns with only their heads exposed, the characters are not allowed to escape from relation in this Dantesque hell. A relentless spotlight, or "the inquirer (light),"[8] focuses upon faces from one to another. It compels them to narrate the sexual twists and turns of their lives. At the opening of each act, they speak at the same time, like a chorus:

> [*Spots off. Blackout. Five seconds. Strong spots simultaneously on three faces. Three seconds. Voices normal strength.*]
> **W1**: I said to him, Give her up –
> **W2**: [Together.] One morning as I was sitting –
> **M**: We were not long together –
> [*Spots off. Blackout. Five seconds. Spot on W1.*][9]

Beckett learned from Alexander that Leibniz explains the doctrine of the pre-established harmony with the analogy of the "choirs of musicians":

> "This combination of independence and harmony may be compared," says Leibnitz, "to different choirs of musicians their parts separately, and so situated that they do not see or even hear one another. Nevertheless they keep perfectly together, by each following their own notes, in such a way that one who hears them all finds in them a harmony that is wonderful and much more perfect than if there had been any connection between them."[10]

Beckett likely had this analogy of "choirs" in his mind when he devised a chorus in *Play*. The three monads in their urns are fixed so closely, and yet, they do not see or even hear one another in their isolation. But still, their voices sound like a chorus. I do not think James Knowlson had any intention to refer to Leibniz in his analysis of *Play*; but his explanation of the three voices in it vividly conveys the wonder of its mechanism, evoking Leibniz's metaphor of the choirs:

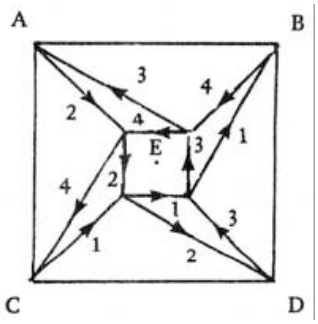
7 S. Beckett, *Endgame*, in *Samuel Beckett: The Complete Dramatic Works* [*CDW*], (London: Faber, 2006), p. 115.
8 Beckett's letter to G. Devine, dated March 9 in 1964, "On Play," in S. Beckett, *Disjecta: Miscellaneous Writings and a Dramatic Fragment*, ed. Ruby Cohn (New York: Grove Press, 1984), p. 111.
9 S. Beckett, *Play*, in *CDW*, p. 308.
10 Alexander, *SHP*, p. 324; from GP II, 95, Leibniz's letter to Arnauld, 1687.

But more important than this is the fact that, rather like a fragmented musical round song, with each voice starting at a different point on the score, the three sets of statements follow the same basic patterns. […]. The impression is that of a clockwork mechanism, in which all the cogs are wound up so that they move inexorably on but coincide only momentarily one with another.[11]

I think that the clockwork mechanism that Knowlson perceives correlates with Leibniz's pre-established harmony in the analogy of choirs. However, *Play* also emphasizes the discord and isolation of the characters in relation to the mechanism. So their encasement is double: the physical encasement in the urns, and the metaphysical encasement in the *windowlessness* under the principle of the pre-established harmony.

3 The Labyrinth of Freedom: *Incommensurability of the Side and the Diagonal*

Quad is a silent drama that was first transmitted in Germany by Süddeutcher Rundfunk in 1982 under the title of *Quadrat 1 + 2*, directed by Beckett. It resembles a dance or a mime. The four players of *Quad* walk unerringly on the sides of a square and the diagonals with mathematical precision, and with every possible combination. They play a series of solo, duo, trio, and quartet on the square following a strict order, with each player accompanied by a different kind of percussion, unfolding the pre-determined clockwork movements. How are we to conceive of this strange and striking image? Such an archetypical, geometric image as this invites numerous interpretations.[12]



One telling aspect of *Quadrat* is how the players avoid the center E. They avoid E even when there is no danger of collision as in a case of solo. Beckett asked himself in his production notebook: "Should solo player avoid E? Yes if *centre dramatized taboo* […]" (Beckett, emphasis added).[13] This center, or what Beckett termed a "dramatized taboo" has long remained a riddle for the scholars. Can Leibniz's metaphysics shed light on this?

Since the 1930s, Beckett has held the relationship of the side of a square and its diagonal as a theological problem. Beckett's short and dense 1938 essay, "Les Deux Besoins" reads:

Dodécahèdre régulier, trop régulier, suivant les dimensions duquel l'infortuné Tout-puissant se serait *proposé* d'arranger les quatre éléments, signature de Pythagore, *divine figure dont la construction dépend d'un irrationnel, à savoir l'incommensurabilité de la diagonale de carré avec le côté*, sujet sans nombre et sans personne. [14]

Beckett's source of this passage is from John Burnet's chapter on Pythagoras in *GPTP*.[15] Burnet introduced the story of Hippasos who divulged Pythagorean secrets, and was drowned at sea "for revealing *the incommensurability of the side and the diagonal*" (p. 55, emphasis added). Also, referring to another who met with the same fate with Hippasos "for publishing the construction of the regular dodecahedron," Burnet explained how the secrets of the Pythagorean were born:

11 J. Knowlson, "Play" in J. Knowlson and J. Pilling, *Frescoes of The Skull: the Later Prose and Drama of Samuel Beckett* (London, John Calder, 1979), pp. 111-120.

12 See, for example, M. Okamuro, "*Quad* and the Jungian Mondala," in *SBT/A* vol. 6, ed. M. Buning, M, Engelberts, and Sjef Houppermans, "Crossroads and Borderlines," (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 1997), pp. 125-133; B. Stevens, "A Purgatorial Calculus: Beckett's Mathematics in *Quad*," in *A Companion to Samuel Beckett*, ed. S. E. Gontarski, (Wiley-Blackwell, 2010), pp. 164-181.

13 Beckett's production notebook for *Quadrat*, Reading University Library MS 2000, dated "Stuttgart April 1981).

14 S. Beckett, "Les Deux Besoins," in *Disjecta*, p. 56.

15 "The incommensurability of the side and the diagonal" also appears in *Murphy* (1938), Beckett, *Murphy* (London: Faber, 2009), p. 32.

Pythagoras was acquainted with the 3: 4: 5 triangle, which is always the right-angle triangle, he may have started from the fact $3^2 + 4^2 = 5^2$. He must, however, have discovered also that this proof broke down in the case of the most perfect triangle of all, the isosceles right-angled triangle, seeing that the relation between its hypotenuse and its sides cannot be expressed by any numerical ratio. *The side of the square is incommensurable with the diagonal.* (p. 54, emphasis added)

This is why *the incommensurability* of the side of the square with the diagonal was put under a taboo: it conflicts with their doctrine that "all things are numbers," exposing that the divine figure of a dodecahedron needs an irrational number for its creation. However, it is too soon to conclude that Beckett's "dramatized taboo" in *Quad* signifies this the Pythagorean taboo. Certainly, *Quad* may represent a taboo of the incommensurability of the side and the diagonal on the stage of the square, but this alone does not explain why the four players avoid the center.

The term "incommensurability" would have reminded Beckett of Nicolaus Cusanus (Nicholas of Cusa) via Windelband who uses the term a few times referring to the Renaissance philosopher. Windelband writes: "There is no proportion between the infinite and the finite; even *the endless series of the finite remains incommensurable with the truly infinite*" (Windelband, *HP*, p. 347, emphasis added). Beckett shortened this quotation and recorded it into his notebook (Beckett, "PN, p. 190). Beckett employed Cusanus's mystic doctrine as a central theme in his novels, i.e. *First Love* and *Malone Dies*.[16] Similarly, what Beckett calls "dramatized taboo," seems to be explained through Cusanus.

Windelband refers to Leibniz in another passage concerning Cusanus's incommensurability (399), pointing out the latter's influence on the former, but Leibniz's thought varies from that of Cusanus distinctively in some respects. Considering the relation of the subject and the predicate geometrically and mathematically, Leibniz admits that "sometimes the analysis can be continued into infinity, as when comparing a rational number with a surd; for instance, the side a square with the diagonal." However Leibniz continues with confidence: "Yet the science of geometry has mastered incommensurable proportions, and we have demonstrations even about infinite series."[17] For Leibniz, who had laid the foundations of both integral and differential calculus in the late 1675, the infinite was no longer unapproachable.

However, Nicholas Rescher points out Leibniz's debt to Cusanus regarding the discovery of infinitesimal calculus:

There can be no doubt that Leibniz's views on this, however greatly indebted to his work on the infinitesimal calculus, were influenced by the teaching of Nicholas of Cusa (in Chap. i-ii of *De docta ignorantia*) that truly accurate reasoning about matters of fact would require an infinite number of inferential steps between the premises and the ultimately desired conclusion, so that the human intellect can only approach, but never attain, the ultimate precision of truth (*praecisio veritatis*).[18]

With *Quad* Beckett's thread penetrates Pythagoras, Cusanus, and Leibniz, and extends itself to those of Geulincx and Spinoza. In the history of theater, plot based on causality had been essential to drama, at least, before Beckett. The plot, as in Sophocles's *Oedipus the Rex*, unfolds the chains of causality one by one revealing how Oedipus, by his will, passion and circumstances, has got involved in a fatal situation gradually and inescapably. However, in Beckett's theater, the plot has disappeared. It seems to have been replaced by repetition, mathematics, and geometry. Instead of

16 For further details, see my essay, N. Mori, "Beckett's Faint Cries in *First Love* and *Malone Dies*: Leibniz's *Petites Perceptions*," in *SBT/A*, vol. 24, "Early Modern Beckett," ed. Angela Moorjani and Danièle de Ruyter, (Amsterdam, Rodopi, forthcoming).

17 Leibniz, "On Freedom," *ca*. 1679; quoted from *Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz: Pholosophical Papers and Letters,* trans. and ed. by L. E. Loemker (Dordrecht: Kluwer, 1989), pp. 265- 266.

18 N. Rescher, *An Introduction to his Philosophy*, 1979; (Aldershot, UK: Gregg Revivals, 1993), p. 23.

the traditional plot, a logico-mathematical mysticism has taken the central place of Beckett's drama. What is the reason for Beckett to explore this? What does he want to express in the metaphysical stage? About this, Beckett's "Philosophy Notes" provide a clue:

> The highest monad, representing universe with perfect distinctness, is unique, God, *central monad*, pure activity. All harmonise by virtue of their common content, hence the action of one substance on another. This relation is the *harmonie préétablie des substances* - in which principle of correspondence of Geulincx & Spinoza for relation of 2 attributes is extended to totality of substances. And with Leibniz, as with them, this principle excludes all chance & freedom (uncaused action). The only freedom is ethical! *Eo magis est libertas quo magis agitur ex ratione*.
> (Windelband, HP, p. 424; Beckett, "PN," p. 191, emphasis in original)

Quad's extended thread focuses itself upon the theme of human freedom in the midst of the pre-established harmony. No matter how problematic it may be, Beckett holds it under the influence of Spinoza's determinism, and under the influence of Geulincx's humility, in which there is no chance and freedom for humans except in the sense of ethics. Although Windelband quotes only the first half Leibniz's axiom from "*De Libertate*. (Op., Erd. ed., 669)," the whole axiom reads: "*Eo magis est libertas quo magis agitur ex ratione*; *ea magis est servitus, qua magis agitur ex animi passionibus*."[19] This second half echoes the ethical conclusion of Guelincx's system, at least, for Beckett:

> The remnant of self-activity in finite beings that remains in the system of Geulincx consists in the immanent mental activity of man. […] The "autology," or *inspectio sui*, is, therefore, not only the epistemological starting-point of the system, but also its ethical conclusion. Man has nothing to do in the outer world. *Ubi nihil vales, ibi nihil velis*. The highest virtue is a modest contentment, submission to God's will— humility, *despectio sui*.[20]

Beckett copied this passage from Windelband into his notebook almost verbatim ("PN," 189). Moreover, this axiom "in the beautiful Belgo-Latin of Arnold Geulincx" so impressed Beckett that he made use of it on a number of occasion including *Murphy*: "*Ubi nihil vales, ibi nihil velis*" [wherein you have no power, therein you should not will] (p. 112).[21] Thereby, as his summary of the passage concerning «*harmonie préétablie des substances*» indicates, we should remember that Geulincx, Spinoza and Leibniz are so closely connected in Beckett.

Thus, *Quad* expresses not only the predicament of the four players in their *windowlessness*, in which they do not hear or see others, but also the incommensurability of the infinite (the diagonal, the irrational) and the finite (the side, "sujet sans nombre et sans personne"), in which the players never attain the center. In addition to these, perhaps, the most important implication about *Quad* is the ethical problem that Beckett finds in the conflict of freedom and determinism of Spinoza, Geulincx and Leibniz. In this labyrinth of freedom, to borrow Leibniz's term, *Quad* juxtaposes the old problem of human freedom and divine omniscience with Beckett's unique adaptation of the metaphysical thread of the Pythagoras-Cusanus-Spinoza-Geulincx-Leibniz.

19 [the more you act from reason, the more freedom you should acquire; the more you act from the passionate mind, the greater servitude you should have (my translation)].

20 Windelband, *HP*, p. 417, n. 2. Beckett copied the passage verbatim into his notebook, "PN," p. 189.

21 English translation is by M. Wilson. See A. Geulincx, *Ethics with Samuel Beckett's Notes*, trans. by M. Wilson, ed. by H.V. Ruller, A. Uhlmann, and M. Wilson (Leiden: Brill, 2006), p. 78.