

Leibniz: An Exploration and Criticism

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Section I: An Introduction

This paper will identify, lay out, and evaluate Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz's theories surrounding the mind-body problem. Leibniz's idea of pre-established harmony is what he considered to be his solution to that problem, and we will outline his thinking in Section III of the paper. Leibniz's idea of pre-established philosophy is one that is grounded much, like most philosophers, in his metaphysical understanding of the mind and the body. Within Section II, I will establish what I considered helpful and necessary for me to grasp a good understanding of pre-established harmony, as Leibniz grounds most of that work in a deeply complex understanding of substance, and lays out a good amount of terminology about the different parts—ironically, considering he is attempting to avoid that break-down—of substances. It will go into an overview of his metaphysics as well as his theory of monads. Section IV, the last section, will go over much of the criticism of pre-established harmony as well as a structural analysis of it by myself, and it will attempt to place Leibniz's thinking in a much more modern debate about the mind-body problem, specifically in regards to physicalism.

Section II: Background and Metaphysics

Introduction

To really get an understanding of what will be discussed when specifically looking at Leibniz's solution to the mind-body problem in his theory of pre-established harmony, it is going to be necessary to get some foundation in his metaphysical understanding. Firstly, Leibniz believes that everything is formulated or broken-down into "simple substances".¹ Leibniz rejects the typical metaphysical understanding of a substance as understood and formulated by Aristotle. Aristotle believed that "a substance is the subject of predication and which cannot be predicated

¹ Broad, *Leibniz: An Introduction*, 39.

of something else”.² Leibniz, however, found this insufficient as an understanding of what a substance is because every true predication holds the *concept* of a substance containing all predicates of its past, present, and future.³ This sets up much of what we will be discussing in his understanding of pre-established harmony, but it also, in a way, makes it impossible for substances to be broken down into smaller parts. To provide context, much of what Leibniz is attempting to get at here is ruled into this idea of monism, or the idea that there is only one substance in the world. So, in his definition of substances as only reducible to themselves and everything in the world being composed of those substances, we are unable to break down, say a rock into the different geological parts that it holds. Now, this is a metaphor for the type of thinking Leibniz has, not that he would actually consider a rock as a substance in that way. These concepts tie into what is known as the *complete individual concept* of substance as a “notion or essence of the substance as it is known by the divine understanding”.⁴ Here, we see Leibniz beginning to unfold some of the important aspects necessary to understanding his solution to the mind-body problem, especially concerning the role of God. In his “doctrine of marks and traces,” Leibniz formulates the idea that all substances, like in his famous example of the soul of Alexander the Great, hold the entire history of the universe and how it is intrinsic to the essence of every individual substance.⁵

Monads

Much of what Leibniz is famously remembered for is his theory of monads. In C. D. Broad’s *Leibniz: An Introduction* (1975), he states that a monad is defined as “a substance which is truly one, i.e. not an aggregate of substances.”⁶ For our sake and clarification in further parts,

² Leibniz, *Discourse on Metaphysics*.

³ Look, Brandon C., "Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz", *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*.

⁴ *Ibid*, 2.

⁵ *Ibid*, 4.1.

⁶ Broad, *Leibniz: An Introduction*, 88.

he also recognizes it as being called “a complete simple substance”.⁷ He comes to draw one of the examples that Leibniz uses in his letters to John Bernoulli by stating that he considers a monad “not so much the soul as the animal itself or something analogous, provided with a soul and an organic body.”⁸ This ties into much of what was written previously in the introduction to Leibniz’s metaphysics with the idea that it is much more an understanding of monism in that it is attempting to avoid the ideas of breaking-down substances into different parts like the organic body or the soul. However, it is important to note that in our understanding of Leibniz’s metaphysical foundations, we need to distinguish this form of monism with the typical, only one substance form like seen in Spinoza. In a sense, Leibniz believed in a “plurality of substances”. Leibniz, according to Broad, was different to Spinoza in their understanding of substance. For Spinoza and those that considered the whole of the universe just one substance, did not think that substance was a “continuant” that has modes. For Leibniz, the connection that he wants to make in his theory of monads to the question of pre-established harmony lies in the infinitely complex nature of the monad.⁹ This plays a large role in joining with his previously stated denial of the *possibility* of interaction of substances that aren’t the same, it requires him to think that any monad you choose at a specific time has to be determined by its previous state, and as Broad states, this is also according to a “purely immanent causal law”.¹⁰

The finale that we see in where Leibniz’s views on metaphysics come together to give us the necessary context for the mind body problem, specifically in our discussion of the different substances, is in his understanding and acceptance of the different substances. Like we’ve seen before, what differs Leibniz from Spinoza is the acceptance of the “simple substances”, and this,

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Leibniz, *Mathematical Writings*, Vol. III, 542.

⁹ Broad, *Leibniz: An Introduction*, 100.

¹⁰ Ibid.

to Leibniz, allows the physical world to have and abide by physical laws. In this, he is merely stating that the physical world can have physical laws, but they just happened to be “expressed in the soul according to its own laws.”¹¹

Section III: Pre-established harmony

Leibniz’s famous solution to the mind-body problem is considered a rejection of Cartesian dualism. For dualism, the mind and body are separate substances, but as we saw in the previous section, Leibniz has some tricky terminology distinctions when regarding how he can be pro-monism, the idea that there is just one substance, while also advocating for what he calls *simple substances*. Ultimately, even though he does consider the world one substance, he does find that the mind and body are metaphysically distinct.¹² Concerning the other matter and problem of how they are the same substance but also metaphysically different, much of the academic debate is unsettled.¹³ However, because we know that he considered them metaphysically distinct, we can still delve into how he discusses his solution to the mind-body problem. Firstly, Leibniz posits that there is no interaction between the mind and body. This can easily seem, especially for modern thinkers, very implausible due to the seeming coordination of things like how when someone pinches you, you feel the mental state of pain. Leibniz’s solution to this is through his theory of pre-established harmony which states that there is a non-causal relationship of harmony or parallelism between the mind and body.

According to Leibniz’s pre-established harmony, no state of a substance was caused by another substance. This is where he first makes the distinction that there is no inter-substantial causal relationship. To extend, he makes it clear that every state of a substance that was not

¹¹ Leibniz, *Philosophical essays*, 205-6.

¹² Kulstad, Mark and Laurence Carlin, "Leibniz’s Philosophy of Mind", *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*.

¹³ Ibid.

miraculous (a completely separate field for Leibniz) or its first state *does* have as a cause some previous state of that substance. This is where we do see his acceptance of some intra-substantial causal relationship. The last part of his theory of pre-established harmony is where we get deepest into his conception of how God fits into this picture. He states that each created substance is programmed or destined at creation. What this means is more than just the fact that these substances are programmed from their beginning to their end, but that each and every substance, like the mind and body, are both programmed in the divine understanding of God, so that in the sense that we see the illusion of causal interaction between the body and mind— like mentioned with the pinching of skin seeming to “cause” the mental state of pain— but not actually the relationship between the mind and body. What we do see, instead, is how the mind and body are parallel to each other because they are both responding to the same program that they were given at their creation by God. In this way, Leibniz does make an argument that provides both for the seeming relationship between causal things while also leaving room for the separation of our mental states.

What is important to note is that even though the mind and body are different *created* substances, they are still the same “overall substance.”¹⁴ An important reason for why this conception of the mind-body issue is relevant and fitting for Leibniz is because of our understanding of his metaphysics. To revisit Section II, Leibniz’s idea of *complete individual concept* posits that the history of the universe is within every substance and is capable of being seen through divine understanding. Through this understanding, we see how Leibniz would then posit that the similarity between some of these different *created substances* like the mind versus the body, do in many ways have similarities and fall within how many view his views as monistic: mainly, that they all, i.e. the mind and body in our case, carry the entire history of the

¹⁴ Ibid.

universe including the predicates of the past, present, and future of the mind or the body. This is how we see him connect to the idea of parallelism, as they are able to act in parallel because one, they are in creation programmed by the same divine creator, God; but two, because they each in their notion or essence carry the entire history of the universe.

To then connect what was last said in the previous section to this one, the thought and concept of unity is important to Leibniz's theory of pre-established harmony. It is especially necessary when looking at the rejection of Descartes and the Cartesian extension. Leibniz posits that "what is not truly one being is not truly one being either".¹⁵ Here he is stating that a substance has to be indivisible, and that the "body", as assumed by Descartes, cannot be a substance. This is also important in truly appreciating Leibniz's full idea of his metaphysical system, one that draws that both "real unity" and "phenomenal unity", and this is where Leibniz makes the connection that the "phenomena" of the body is formulated from his conception of simple substances.¹⁶

Section IV: Criticisms

Like we've hinted at, and to much dislike by many modern scholars and physicalists as well as dualists, Leibniz's reliance on God seems to be the foundation of his understanding of pre-established harmony.¹⁷ Much of what we see in his understanding of substance and *complete individual concept* only make complete sense to us when in the last premise or part of his explanation, he explains that God and his all-knowing creation are part of the solution. So, in this way, many, like myself, criticize the fact that he is working not through thinking about the metaphysical reality of the world to then find God, but looking from God and then working it

¹⁵ Look, Brandon C., "Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz", *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*.

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ Tissander, Alex, *Affirming Divergence: Deleuze's Reading of Leibniz*, 37.

outwards. However, to give Leibniz some credit, there were problems, like we noticed in his rejection of Aristotelian conceptions of substance, that he found in the works of others who weren't working outwards from God.

Another criticism that I found, as well as specifically through Broad's introduction to Leibniz, is that much of Leibniz's thinking is a necessary result of a previous claim. For example, in his claim that different substances can't interact, he then has to make assumptions like the fact that in his theory of monads, the monad has to be causally determined by its immediately preceding state.¹⁸ This also is a large criticism put forth against his, among other old-school philosophers, the reliance and assumption of God. However, what I am also trying to stay away from is the feeling that Leibniz's views were solely the assumption of God without any real– and especially in the case of modern times, scientific– basis for it.

For instance, I think a great way to account for Leibniz's view on physicalism gives a great understanding as to why he sides and promotes his view of pre-established harmony. As mentioned in the previous section, unity is important to Leibniz's understanding of perception. Due to his understanding of unity in our experience, the materialist claim would be impossible in his eyes due to the fact that it doesn't incorporate something that, in a way, completely transforms into something and becomes indivisible. So, to further expand, he would find the materialist perspective on perception as impossible due to its ability to break down into parts.¹⁹ This, to me, is where we find another place in Leibniz that makes it clear that he has thought through and provided routes for us to go when we want to criticize his theories and views, but just because they follow the right pathway doesn't mean it is necessarily right. Even on top of all of these logical necessities, they are founded on the assumption of God and his ability to create,

¹⁸ Broad, 100.

¹⁹ Wilson, Margaret, "Leibniz and Materialism", 508.

so much of what someone like Leibniz could do, is completely possible following that assumption. However, I do think that there could be arguments to how valid his claims are if we do claim those things. For example, he claims that through our acceptance of a creative God and his view of non-interactive substances, it would then require us to think of these monads and states as necessarily determined.

In my own thinking after reading Leibniz, I do understand why it would be necessary for those to be determined, and I find his choice of making those assumptions about God and the non-interactive substances very convenient. As, if one were to accept that different substances can't interact as well as that they were created by God, it would imply that they only really have one direction to go, and that is completely decided by their initial movement as defined and authored by God. However, there are problems that come about like the discussion of conceivability, as one could, and has, put forth the idea that it is conceivable that there be a God and that substances don't interact with one another, and that there are still elements of creation within the different states of that substance due to the *impossibility of knowing* the true scale of what God had created for it. To clarify, it might be strange to say that we can conceive of God "creating" something and then assuming that there is not going to be a miraculous intervention from God in its future. However, even a scenario like that has been thought of by Leibniz, and he clarifies that his theory of pre-established harmony doesn't count for non-initial or non-miraculous changes or movements.

So, to conclude, it feels that Leibniz creates a very sound world for his metaphysical system to live within, but it all still rests on the existence and acceptance of a creative God, and like much of modern debate, there doesn't seem to be a real point to arguing against it.

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