

**Philosophy 203: History of Modern Western Philosophy**  
Spring 2010  
Tuesdays, Thursdays: 9am - 10:15am

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Leibniz, *Monadology* and *Discourse on Metaphysics*

I. Minds, bodies, and pre-established harmony

We finished our last class talking about how Leibniz's view of minds and bodies led to his own version of the problem of interaction.

Minds are a special kind of monad, which have bodies as their appearances.

The activity of monads is internal, which is what makes them substances.

Monads have a series of perceptions.

The life of a monad is like unfolding its inner core.

For non-soul monads, the series of their perceptions are all unconscious.

Our internal perceptions often come to us, like well-ordered dreams, from ourselves.

But, even for conscious monads, the series is often unconscious, as when we sleep.

Strictly speaking, the only real things are minds, which follow laws governing final causes.

The life of the monad consists of the unfolding of its perceptions in an order determined by the will.

Bodies, though mere appearances, still follow the laws of efficient causation.

So, the question arises: given that they obey different laws, why are the laws governing final causes precisely compatible with the laws governing efficient causes?

We have already seen that Spinoza solves the problem of interaction by positing a parallelism that results from the unity of substance: mind and body are two different ways of looking at the same thing.

The part of Spinoza's claim that takes the body to be another perspective on the mind is amenable to Leibniz.

But, Leibniz rejects Spinoza's singularity of substance, embracing the multiplicity.

So, he can not say that bodies and mind are each perspectives on the same thing.

Malebranche, whose work we did not read but to whom Leibniz is often responding, had argued for occasionalism.

Occasionalists argue that communication of motion among substances is impossible.

They see the problem of interaction (between mind and body) as a special case of a general problem of causal interaction (between any two things).

Let's take a moment to see the general problem.

The occasionalists were generally dualists, and the problem of interaction arises mainly for dualists.

Within a dualist framework, there are four kinds of causal interactions:

CI1. Body-body (e.g. when one curling stone transfers momentum to the next)

CI2. Body-mind (e.g. when one's body is harmed and the mind feels pain)

CI3. Mind-body (e.g. when I decide to take a walk, and my body gets up and goes)

CI4. Intra-mental (e.g. when I think about my children and that causes me joy)

We have seen that CI2 and CI3 are problems for the dualist.

But, CI1 is also a problem for Descartes.

Recall that he claims that God both creates and preserves the universe, and that no one moment in any way necessitates the next.

Such a claim could also undermine CI4, since there appears to be no more necessity in the order of my thoughts than in the order of events in the world.

The occasionalist argues that all types of causation are problematic.

Their central argument against CI1 is that bodies are passive, and thus can exert no force on each other.

When I see one ball strike another, my eyes ... seem to tell me, that the one is truly the cause of the motion it impresses on the other... . But when I consult my reason I clearly see that since bodies cannot move themselves, and since their motor force is but the will of God that conserves them successively in different places, they cannot communicate a power they do not have and could not communicate even if it were in their possession. For the mind will never conceive that one body, a purely passive substance, can in any way whatsoever transmit to another body the power transporting it. (Malebranche, *The Search for Truth and Elucidations of the Search for Truth*, p 660).

On occasionalism, Bodies themselves can do nothing but respond to the will of an active substance.

Whenever a body is affected, there must be an agent to manage that interaction.

In body-mind events, CI2, God intervenes to create a mental events whenever the body is affected.

Thus, God does the moving.

Some people read Descartes as an occasionalist.

Leibniz accepts that the problem of causation among passive bodies is a serious one, but he rejects the occasionalist's solution.

Leibniz sternly rejects the occasionalist's recourse to appeals to God to guide every interaction.

In solving problems it is not sufficient to make use of the general cause and to invoke what is called a *Deus ex machina*. For when one does that without giving any other explanation derived from the order of secondary causes, it is, properly speaking, having recourse to a miracle (*New System of Nature*, AW 273a).

Instead, Leibniz claims that monads are independent, and cannot affect one another.

Nothing ever enters into our mind naturally from the outside; and we have a bad habit of thinking of our soul as if it received certain species as messengers and as if it has doors and windows...The mind always expresses all its future thoughts and already thinks confusedly about everything it will ever think about distinctly (DM 26, AW 240b).

This isolation of each monad is essential to their character, to their completeness.

The universe is multiplied many times over, in each monad.

There is also no way of explaining how a monad can be altered or changed internally by some other creature, since one cannot transpose anything in it, nor can one conceive of any internal motion that can be excited, directed, augmented, or diminished within it, as can be done in composites, where there can be change among the parts. The monads have no windows through which something can enter and leave (M 7, AW 275b)

The denial of the real existence of bodies, then, entails that C1-C3 are all moot.

Leibniz holds on to CI4, arguing that while there is no transeunt causation, there is internal, or immanent, causation.

Immanent causation is, as we have seen, guided by the will.

The problem of interaction, then, for Leibniz, is not, like Descartes's problem, to describe the interaction between mental substances and physical substances.

Strictly speaking, there are only mental substances.

Nor is Leibniz's problem of interaction, like the occasionalist's problem, to account for causation generally.

Instead, Leibniz's problem of interaction is to explain why, given the laws governing the series of perceptions and representations in the monad is there a parallel series in the appearances of the monad (i.e. the body) which are governed by strict physical laws.

In other words, he must explain why there appear to be transeunt efficient-causal interactions when there are only immanent, final-causal sequences of perceptions.

Leibniz solves his problem of interaction by proposing a system of pre-established harmony, much like Spinoza's parallelism.

The soul follows its own laws and the body also follows its own; and they agree in virtue of the harmony pre-established between all substances, since they are all representations of a single universe (M78, AW 282a).

Leibniz's argument for parallelism is clearer in *New System of Nature*, 273a-b, than it is in either the *Monadology* or the *Discourse on Metaphysics*; you might look at it there.

The central claim is that the appearances of bodies appear to follow the laws of efficient causation since they are designed by God to do so, in parallel with the pre-programmed series of perceptions of the soul.

Without transeunt causation, the relations among monads are just pre-established harmony.

God puts the universe in motion in such a way that the mind and body seem to affect each other, and such that monads seem to affect each other.

Immanent causation, the relations among perceptions of a monad, are not impugned.

But, the appearance of transeunt causation is, as it was for Spinoza, an illusion.

While this pre-established harmony undermines the freedom of the will, by positing a determined sequence of events, it also makes that freedom easier to describe, since interactions among bodies need not be taken as governed by external laws.

(Aside: Leibniz criticizes an error in Descartes's claim that the soul can affect the body.

Descartes had argued that it would violate the laws of physics for souls to add motion into the universe, but that it would not violate laws for a soul to change the direction of a body.

Descartes believed correctly that quantity of motion (momentum) was conserved in a physical interaction. In that, he anticipated Newton's laws of motion.

But Descartes misinterpreted momentum as a scalar quantity, ignoring its vector (or directional) qualities, and leaving open the option for a soul to interact with bodies without violating physical laws.

Leibniz believes that Descartes would have adopted his view of pre-established harmony, if he had seen the error in his physics.

Descartes recognized that souls cannot impart a force to bodies because there is always the same quantity of force in matter. However, he thought that the soul could change the direction of bodies. But that is because the law of nature, which also affirms the conservation of the same total direction in matter, was not known at the time. If he had known it, he would have hit upon my system of pre-established harmony... (M80, AW 282b).

End aside.)

## II. Theodicy

Leibniz holds, perhaps most famously, that this world is the best of all possible worlds.

In the *Monadology*, Leibniz argues for this conclusion from one of his two basic principles, the principle of sufficient reason.

- T1. God is omnipotent and omniscient and benevolent and the free creator of the world.
- T2. Things could have been otherwise—i.e., there are other possible worlds.
- T3. If this world is not the best of all possible worlds, then at least one of the following must be the case:
  - T3a. God was not powerful enough to bring about a better world; or
  - T3b. God did not know how this world would develop after his creation of it; or
  - T3c. God did not wish this world to be the best; or
  - T3d. God did not create the world.
- T4. T3a-T3d all contradict T1.
- T5. Therefore, this world is the best of all possible worlds (M53, AW 280a et seq.).

Note that God is, according to Leibniz, obligated to create the best world possible as a requirement of divine benevolence.

We might wonder how worlds get ranked in order of goodness, what the criteria of goodness are.

Spinoza worried about our anthropocentric projections, especially of the nature of goodness, onto God.

Leibniz takes the universality of mathematics as paradigmatic, using simplicity and richness as criteria.

God has chosen the most perfect world, that is, the one which is at the same time the simplest in hypotheses and the richest in phenomena, as might be a line in geometry whose construction is easy and whose properties and effects are extremely remarkable and widespread (D6, AW 227a-b).

Voltaire lampooned Leibniz's claim T5 in *Candide*, just as he derided his claims about monads.

Though Leibniz's claim does seem false, even absurd, sneering is not an argument.

The obvious argument against Leibniz's claim is that we can imagine better possible worlds.

We might agree with Spinoza in thinking that everything non-contradictory is possible.

No obvious contradiction arises from the concept of a world just like this one but with, say, less famine and war.

Thus, there seem to be other possible worlds better than this one.

(David Lewis, in the 20th Century argues for modal realism: all possible worlds exist; the Spinozan view persists.)

Leibniz insists that the possibility of an event alone does not entail its compossibility with other events.

Thus, alternative worlds appear possible, but only because we are seeing them incompletely.

The problem of knowing whether possibilities are compossible explains Leibniz's criticism of Descartes's ontological argument for the existence of God.

We have been taking Leibniz's claim for the existence of God as axiomatic.

In fact, Leibniz presents a version of the ontological argument, criticizing Descartes's version.

Leibniz complains that Descartes's argument only shows that the concept of God contains existence, if God exists.

The argument omits a defense of the initial instantiation of the concept.

But since we often think of impossible chimeras - for example of the highest degree of speed, of the greatest number, of the intersection of the conchoid with its base of rule - this reasoning is insufficient... There are true and false ideas, depending upon whether the thing in question is possible or not. And it is only when we are certain of its possibility that we can boast of having an idea of the thing (D23, AW 239a).

It remains for the defender of the ontological argument to show that it is possible for God to exist, that the perfections are compossible.

Leibniz argues that perfections are compossible since they are simples, and all simples are compossible. You can find a more detailed analysis of Descartes's argument, and Leibniz's improvement of the argument, in an essay called, "That a most perfect being exists."

More relevant to our reading is his cosmological, or causal argument, for the existence of God.

There must be a *sufficient reason* in *contingent truths*, or *truths of fact*, that is, in the series of things distributed throughout the universe of creatures, where the resolution into particular reasons could proceed into unlimited detail...And since all of this *detail* involves nothing but other prior and or more detailed contingents, each of which needs a similar analysis in order to give its reason...It must be the case that the sufficient or ultimate reason is outside the sequence or *series* of this multiplicity of contingencies, however infinite it may be...The ultimate reason of things must be in a necessary substance in which the diversity of changes is only eminent, as in its source. This is what we call *God* (M336-8, AW 278b).

From the mere existence of this world, and the principle of sufficient reason, Leibniz thus derives the standard infinite characteristics of God.

God, according to Leibniz, must have an infinite understanding, in order to survey all possible worlds.

God must have an infinite will which allows him to choose among all possible worlds.

And, God must have infinite power to create this world.

See *Theodicy*, §7, for more on these derivations.

For now, we are concerned with the problem of compossibility, of arguing that this world, despite its flaws, is really the maximization of compossible events.

According to Leibniz, this world is the result of God's maximizing various factors which are in tension, even if the tension is not apparent.

Just as the same city viewed from different directions appears entirely different and, as it were, multiplied perspectively, in just the same way it happens that, because of the infinite multitude of simple substances, there are, as it were, just as many different universes, which are, nevertheless, only perspectives on a single one, corresponding to the different points of view of each monad... And this is the way of obtaining as much variety as possible, but with the greatest order possible, that is, it is the way of obtaining as much perfection as possible (M58, AW 280b).

Leibniz's view, then, recalls Descartes's claim, in the Fourth Meditation, that the perfection of the whole is not apparent from the view of the finite individual.

Leibniz believes that a world without disasters would be a world with irregular laws, in which science and engineering would be impossible.

A world without sin would be a worse world, even if it does not appear to be worse.