

LEIBNIZ, COMPOSITE SUBSTANCES AND THE PERSISTENCE OF LIVING THINGS

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One of the several points at which Leibniz's metaphysics appears to lose contact with common sense and verge on fantasy is where he says that living things such as men or fishes or plants never truly die but are in their way no less eternal than those simple substances that are the fundamental monads of his system (*e.g.*, *Monadology* §76). Here I shall argue that, appearances to the contrary, it is plain enough why he thinks this and also that, strange as it may seem, comparatively little emendation to his way of thinking is needed before we find an interesting convergence between his way of understanding the natural world and our own.

What are living things? They are unities consisting of a dominant monad and an organic body that is particularly tied to it, a body by means of which the dominant monad perceives the world around it and through the voluntary control of which it is able to bring about the satisfaction of its desires (*Monadology* §63). Every monad has to be dominant over some such body because only if it is will it be possible for it to enjoy perception and appetite, and monads have to enjoy those things since they are the sole qualities that simple substances can possess. Lacking perception and appetite a monad would have no qualities, and just as qualities cannot exist in the absence of some sub-

stance of which they are qualities, so in the absence of any qualities a substance could not exist at all (*Monadology* §8).

The body that a given monad dominates consists of other monads, although which monads these are will be constantly change from moment to moment. Leibniz observes that there is Heraclitean flux here and that no portion of matter (*viz.* collection of subdominant monads) is assigned to a given dominant monad throughout the latter's existence (*Monadology* §71). The body that a cabbage or an ant or a man possesses retains its individual stability on the Leibnizian conception of things despite the fact that its elements are in flux. To us there is nothing strange about this since we see ourselves as bodily continuants of a kind whose existence is unthreatened by the metabolic process.

The point at which we are liable to encounter some difficulty with Leibniz's introduction of living things is in adequately distinguishing them from what he calls "*phenomena bene fundata*". These latter are material things which do not qualify as genuine substances in that they have no true unity as is made manifest by their tendency to dissolve or come apart. A block of ice, a flock of sheep, a wormy cheese are examples that Leibniz offers of such things: they are composed of simple substances all right (there is nothing else that they could be composed of), and they are real enough in that they borrow their reality from the reality of their constituting simples, but their unity is a purely conventional or as Leibniz sometimes says, a "mental" matter. That a large group of monads makes up a single block of ice depends on nothing more than our determination to count that mass as a single thing, and a genuine substance, be it simple or complex, has to have a unity that is natural, and not conventional in the way that these things are.

The difficulty that Leibniz appears to encounter – perhaps it appeared to him that he encountered it – is to figure out how living things consisting of some dominant monad together with an organic body could be genuine substances, how they could enjoy any unity that warrants us in thinking of them as anything more than *phenomena bene fundata*. To take an example that Leibniz discusses in his correspondence with Arnauld, it would seem as though the body that is more or less under my voluntary control during my lifetime ceases to be so when I die and persists a while as a corpse¹. But in that case it does indeed look as if the dominant monad and its organic body have come

apart, and hence together lack precisely that unbreakable unity which alone would entitle a good Leibnizian to account the original composite living thing a true substantial unity. Setting aside the soul or the dominant monad, the body itself is surely no more than a conventional or phenomenal unity, just like the block of ice or the flock of sheep or the wormy cheese. If this is so, it is bound to strike us that Leibniz's determination to pick out certainly men and, he is inclined to think, many other naturally occurring things as truly substantial composites that are metaphysically quite distinct from aggregative phenomena like the cheese is under threat. To put it starkly, how could there possibly be such real things whose high grade, substantial, reality depends on their possessing a body whose reality itself is no more than low grade and phenomenal?

When Leibniz considers the example of the cadaver he is quite explicit that there we do have to do with a phenomenon and not a complex substance. And given that, it may strike us as astute enough on his part, but ultimately, surely, quite hopeless, to say that living things are indeed composite substances and that they never truly die. For even if that might serve to mark out a possible relation between dominant monads and bodies that is distinct from the relation between the self and the body that becomes a corpse, it is all too likely that we shall say on the basis of straightforward observation that such a relation is never realised, and hence that neither cabbages, nor ants nor even men are instances of it. The introduction of the everlasting body constantly conjoined with the indissoluble simple soul like substance is likely to seem nothing more than a kind of metaphysical wishful thinking. Intellectually speaking, it looks quite inapplicable to the actual world.

Such an accusation is mistaken, I think, and it does scant justice to the subtlety of Leibniz's thought. To set things right we need only reflect a little on the idea of a monad's organic body. In our perceptual engagement with the world we are sensitive to far off events through the way in which mechanically they impress themselves or leave traces on other bodies, which in turn transmit that information to yet other bodies (*Monadology* §61). A chain of such transmitted impressions terminates at the point at which a simple soullike monad is immediately sensitive to information that is mechanically inscribed on a particular body of matter (*Monadology* §63). The body of which the mo-

nad is thus immediately aware in perceiving the world around it is its own body. Similarly, in realizing my desires I bring about changes in the world around me, often changes that take place at some distance from me. So in order to satisfy my thirst, say, I have to bring it about that water flows from a tap in some room in the house some distance away from me. To do this I have to engineer changes in the world between myself and the tap, perhaps by getting you to go to the kitchen and turn the tap on. And this I do through some change in a body over which I have direct control, exercised on this occasion perhaps by moving my lips, tongue and mouth as I ask you to fetch me a glass of water. So, as in the case of perception, desire also can only be satisfied through the monadic self possessing a body over which it has unmediated control. Such is the Leibnizian picture.

Now, it is not so very far from here to saying that my organic body will be whatever body of matter it is that in perception and appetite I have immediate awareness and control of. This it seems is just what Leibniz does want to say, since that, and as far as I can see that alone, is what entitles him to reject the idea of metempsychosis, and with it Locke's fantasy of the prince and the cobbler exchanging bodies (Cf. *Nouveaux Essais*, II.xxvii.14-15). If the dominant monad that is me at one time dominates a body that we think of as that of a cobbler and then later on comes to dominate a mass of monads that act in a more princely way, the right thing to say will not be that the dominant monad has come to control a different body, but that the body that the single self controls is unchanged in being numerically the same one, but has adapted itself to qualitative changes in the sorts of desire and perception that are now enjoyed by the one persisting self. Metamorphosis of this kind there may be (and that Leibniz approves of) but metempsychosis, no (*Monadology* §72).

To get to the point of affirming that the body is everlasting and to understand Leibniz's motivation for speaking of the cadaver as he does we have to remind ourselves of the everlasting nature of the simple substances that make up the world. Their simplicity ensures that they do not perish or come into being in natural ways. For they have no parts, and when things (aggregates) perish or come to be in the way of nature they perish and come to be by dissolution and by combination of parts. The everlasting character of these simples, however, is not an

absolute metaphysical necessity, for no contradiction is involved in supposing that within the temporal order of things God might annihilate some and create others. That they enjoy temporally unending existence is however a hypothetical necessity, underwritten by the principle of sufficient reason, since the world that actually exists is the best world that it was open to God to have created, and any alteration to its original constitution that might be wrought by further creation or novel annihilation would imply that the original set he decided to create was less good than it might have been. So Leibniz will say that it is a consequence of the principle of sufficient reason that monadic simples are imperishable.

Now, we have seen that a simple substance must possess an organic body throughout its existence, and also that whatever functioning body it possesses and immediately controls at a given time will be the very same body as it possesses and immediately control at any other time. Once that is in place we can infer that all simple substances, persisting everlastingly as they do, must possess bodies that themselves persist eternally. To suppose this is not just metaphysical wishful thinking; it is the direct consequence of the underlying principles governing the way in which the natural world is conceived of. Given that, we can see that Leibniz has no option but to treat the matter of the corpse, which after all precisely no longer serves the perceptual and appetitive needs of a dominant monad, as a phenomenal unity. That is, it is no more than a quantity of matter sloughed off in Heraclitean fashion by a dominant monad whose new needs enable it to dispense with its services and for the sake of which needs it must now have taken on some other quantity of matter in the fulfillment of the internal principle that governs its development. Seen from this point of view, the mistake we are prone to make in the ordinary way in which we think of the dead body is to suppose that it is the very same body as was previously alive, but we can see now that from Leibniz's point of view this must be a mistake. The dominant monad that was once served by that mass of matter is still around and is still necessarily endowed with its own organic body, which may have shrunk or otherwise changed its demeanor in surprising ways, yet the shrunken body that it now controls has to be (a stage of) the very same organic body as was previously made up of the mass of matter that now lies inert upon the



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