

Handout 17: Leibniz's Idealism and Philosophy of Mind

Philosophy 322: Modern Philosophy
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1. No extended thing is a substance. (This is a consequence of INDIVISIBILITY, together with Leibniz's claim that all extended things are divisible.) But what, then, are tables? What is the relationship between a table and the substances that exist? Leibniz's answer: bodies are "a phenomenon resulting from simple substances, which alone have unity and absolute reality" (from the letter to De Volder). What does this mean?

Possibility 1: the table is nothing more than the series of table-perceptions in our souls.

Possibility 2: the table is somehow an aggregate of monads distinct from our souls.

George Berkeley held a view like Possibility 1. Leibniz is closer to 2, though exactly how an aggregate of non-extended substances can "result in" an extended thing remains obscure.

2. CAUSAL ISOLATION says that no substance causes anything to occur in any other substance. Exactly why Leibniz thinks this is a bit obscure, but here are two considerations from *Primary Truths*:

Strictly speaking, one can say that *no created substance exerts a metaphysical action on any other thing*. For, not to mention the fact that one cannot explain how something can pass from one thing into the substance of another, we have already shown that from the notion of each and every thing follows all of its future states (Leibniz, 'Primary Truths').

I think Leibniz would defend his first claim (that one cannot explain how something can pass from one thing into the substance of another) on the grounds that substance has no parts (see also *Monadology* 7). The second claim is that given COMPLETE CONCEPTS, we already have an explanation for every perception and appetite that ever affects any monad (i.e., that perception or appetite is part of that monad's nature). So it's explanatorily superfluous to posit the existence of inter-substantial causation.

3. Given the causal isolation of each substance, what explains the fact that distinct things *seem* to causally interact? Leibniz's answer is that there is a "pre-established harmony" among substances — God has given each substance a complete concept that "fits" with all the others.

4. The pre-established harmony among monads also explains the relationship between mind and body. Just as God has set up all monads in such a way that their perceptions and appetites all “fit” with each other, he has established a harmony between each mind and its corresponding body. Leibniz has a two-pronged argument for this idea (which is a form of *parallelism*). First, he says that the idea of Descartes’s interactionism (i.e., that minds and bodies can causally influence each other) is “unintelligible”. (As we’ve seen, Princess Elisabeth and Spinoza both thought the same thing.) Second, in his “Second Explanation of the New System” (the relevant quote is available on the document called “Leibniz Supplementary Texts,” which is linked from the course website) he argues that a pre-established harmony is “the most beautiful and the most worthy” way God could have set up the relationship between mind and body. And as we know, God always acts in the best way possible.
5. Leibniz presents an interesting argument that perception cannot be understood mechanically (i.e., in terms of interactions between extended things). Here is *Monadology* 17:

If we imagine that there is a machine whose structure makes it think, sense, and have perceptions, we could conceive it enlarged, keeping the same proportions, so that we could enter into it, as one enters into a mill. Assuming that, when inspecting its interior, we will only find parts that push one another, and we will never find anything to explain a perception. And so, we should seek perception in the simple substance and not in the composite or in the machine.

If perception were a mechanical phenomenon, then we could, in principle, enlarge the “machine”, go inside, and have a look around. But we would never see any perceptions; all we would see is the machine doing its work. So, Leibniz thinks, the claim the perception is mechanical is inconceivable.