Handout 16: Leibniz on Substance

Philosophy 322: Modern Philosophy
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1. In section 8 of the *Discourse on Metaphysics*, Leibniz discusses an important consequence of the PCP. Consider a true proposition that says that a particular substance S is P. According to the PCP, the concept of S contains the concept of P. The same holds for everything truly predicated of S. So the concept of S contains the concept of everything that can be truly predicated of S. As Leibniz says:

   > [T]he nature of an individual substance or of a complete being is to have a notion [i.e., concept] so complete that it is sufficient to contain and to allow us to deduce from it all the predicates of the subject to which this notion is attributed (Leibniz, *Discourse* 8).

2. Consider a few of the things that can be truly said of Barack Obama:

   (1) Barack Obama has a daughter named Malia.
   (2) Barack Obama was born after Julius Caesar.
   (3) Barack Obama doesn't live in Paris.
   (4) Barack Obama will die before the sun annihilates the earth.

   So the concept of Barack Obama contains not only contains the concepts of each of Obama's properties, but also the concepts of every relation he stands in to anything else. Leibniz:

   > [W]e can say that from all time in Alexander's soul there are vestiges of everything that has happened to him and marks of everything that will happen to him and even traces of everything that happens in the universe, even though God alone could recognize them all (Leibniz, *Discourse* 8).

3. Anything that's part of the concept of a substance flows from the nature of the substance. Given that Obama's concept contains all of these "marks" and "traces", (1) - (4) follow from his nature. The same goes for all substances:

   > COMPLETE CONCEPTS
   > Every property and relation of a substance is contained within its complete concept; hence, every property and relation of a substance follows from its nature.

4. This idea should be familiar from Spinoza, who held that every finite mode follows with necessity from God's nature (1P16, 1P29). But Leibniz denies Spinoza's substance monism: for Leibniz, there are infinitely many simple substances. Each contains traces of everything that ever happens in the universe, but they are differentiated because each has a different *perspective* on the universe from all of the others.

5. In section 9 of the *Discourse*, Leibniz articulates and names a very famous claim, which we saw anticipated in Spinoza:

   > PRINCIPLE OF THE IDENTITY OF INDISCERNIBLES (PII)
   > If A and B are indiscernible (i.e., if for all properties F, A is F if and only if B is F), then A = B.[1]

   PII derives its plausibility from the Principle of Sufficient Reason, to which Leibniz is also committed (see, e.g., *Monadology* 32). Suppose that A and B are indiscernible. If A ≠ B, then given the PSR, there is an explanation for why A ≠ B. But if there is no property of A that is not also a property of of B, nothing is true of A that isn't also true of B. Hence there can be no explanation for why A ≠ B. Thus A = B.

6. Leibniz then gives two more principles (he says they "follow from" COMPLETE CONCEPTS, though it is not clear how):

   > DURATION
   > The only way for a substance to come into existence is to be created by God, and the only way for a substance to go out of existence is to be annihilated by God.

   > INDIVISIBILITY
   > A substance cannot be divided.

   To motivate DURATION and INDIVISIBILITY we should turn to the *Monadology*, where Leibniz develops his theory of simple substances, which he calls *monads*. In M2 (i.e., *Monadology* paragraph 2), he says that there must *be* simple substances, given that there are aggregates. So simple substances don't have parts. If simple substances were divisible, they would have parts, but they don't; hence INDIVISIBILITY. There are only two ways for something to come into existence: either by an act of creation by God, or by composition from other things that already exist. Since monads are simple, they cannot be composed by things that already exist (i.e., they cannot come into existence "naturally" (M5)). Similarly, there are only two ways for something to go out of existence: either by decomposition into parts, or by an act of annihilation by God. Since monads have no parts, they cannot decompose into parts (M5). Thus, we have DURATION.

7. Since all extended things are divisible, they have parts. So no simple substance is extended (M3). Given that monads are not extended, what are they? They are *mind-like*. They are

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[1] For the princple to be non-trivial, the range of properties relevant to indiscernibility must be limited to those that do not entail identity. E.g., A has the property of being identical to A. Obviously, if B has *that* property, then A = B; if the property of being identical to A is relevant for the purposes of determining whether A and B are indiscernible, then PII is trivially true. So most statements of PII restrict the relevant properties to those which could, in principle, be had by something not identical with A (or with B); such properties are sometimes called *qualitative* properties.

characterized in terms of *perception* (M14) and *appetite* (M15). Thus Leibniz is an idealist: bodies are in some sense reducible to or explained in terms of mind-like simple substances.

8. Leibniz draws an important distinction between "bare monads" and what he calls "souls"— i.e., what we usually call "minds". Souls are monads, but not all monads are souls. A soul's perceptions are "more distinct" than those of a bare monad (M19). Souls, unlike bare monads, have memories (M19). Bare monads are "always in a stupor" (M24), which Leibniz describes in M21 as follows:

> [W]hen there is a great multitude of small perceptions in which nothing is distinct, we are stupefied. This is similar to when we continually spin in the same direction several times in succession, from which arises a dizziness that can make us faint and does not allow us to distinguish anything (AW 277a).

He likens the perceptual state of a bare monad to what it is like "when we faint or when we are overwhelmed by a deep, dreamless sleep" (M20). Nonetheless, bare monads do have perceptions and appetites, and are in a fundamental sense the *same kinds of things* as souls.

9. Because they are simple, and because (given COMPLETE CONCEPTS) the essence of a monad contains every perception and appetite it will every have, monads are *causally isolated* from each other. As Leibniz puts it, they "have no windows" (M7):

CAUSAL ISOLATION
No monad causes a change in any other monad.

10. But doesn't it *seem* that distinct substances causally interact? When a ball crashes into a window, it seems that the ball causes the window to shatter. Leibniz thinks this apparent causal interaction results from a *pre-established harmony* among monads. Each monad is a "perpetual, living mirror of the universe" (M56) and reflects all of the others perfectly.

11. In the next handout we'll discuss two significant questions:

(1) What is the relationship between bodies and monads?
(2) What is the relationship between me and my body?