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Substance Monism and Substance Pluralism in Leibniz's Metaphysical Papers 1675-1676

By

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Zusammenfassung

Neuere Interpretationen von Leibniz' Notizen zur Metaphysik aus den Jahren 1675-1676 tendieren dazu, diese Texte im Licht eines spinozistischen Substanz-Monismus zu lesen. Obwohl es für eine solche Interpretation überzeugende Anhaltspunkte gibt, vertritt Leibniz jedoch in denselben Texten auch einen Substanzen-Pluralismus in Bezug auf geistige Substanzen. Substanz-Monismus und Substanzen-Pluralismus scheinen miteinander vereinbar zu sein, weil für Leibniz, ähnlich wie für Descartes in den *Principia philosophiae*, der Terminus ‚Substanz‘ nicht in univoker Weise von Gott und von Gegenständen in der Welt ausgesagt werden kann.

In recent articles, Mark Kulstad and Catherine Wilson have argued that Leibniz's metaphysics in the years 1675-1676 basically is a substance monism in which three different strands of thought converge: a monistic neo-platonic emanation scheme, an averroistic doctrine of an unique 'active intellect', and a spinozistic theory of particulars as modes of a single substance¹. This is not to say that entities that in Leibniz's later philosophy play a central role, such as minds and persons, do not form an important aspect of Leibniz's ontology in 1675-1676. Stuart Brown, who also embraces the substance monism thesis, even characterises the philosophy of these early years as a "proto-monadology"². The question rather is whether Leibniz regards these entities as substances or as modes or parts of a unique substance.

In this discussion note, I propose an interpretation of Leibniz's early metaphysical papers that diverges from the interpretations of Kulstad, Wilson, and Brown. I agree that Leibniz in 1675-1676 embraced an ontology of substance monism and that he at the same time developed various aspects of his

- 1 M. Kulstad: "Did Leibniz Incline towards Monistic Pantheism in 1676?", in: *Leibniz und Europa. VI. Internationaler Leibniz-Kongress. Vorträge 1. Teil*, Hannover 1994, pp. 424-428; M. Kulstad: "Leibniz's *De Summa Rerum*. The Origin of the Variety of Things, in Connection with the Spinoza-Tschirnhaus Correspondence", in: D. Berlioz and F. Nef (eds.): *L'actualité de Leibniz: Les deux Labyrinthes (= Studia Leibnitiana, Supplementa XXXIV)*, Stuttgart 1999, pp. 69-85; C. Wilson: "Atoms, Minds and Vortices in *De Summa Rerum*: Leibniz vis-à-vis Hobbes and Spinoza", in: S. Brown (ed.): *The Young Leibniz and his Philosophy (1646-1676)*, Dordrecht 1999, pp. 223-243, especially pp. 227-228.
- 2 S. Brown: "The Proto-Monadology of the *De Summa Rerum*", in: Brown (ed.): *The Young Leibniz and his Philosophy (1646-1676)* (see note 1), pp. 263-287, especially p. 265.

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later monadology. Nevertheless, I think that Leibniz in these years also embraced an ontology of substance pluralism. In the framework of his early ontology, minds and persons are substances in a quite technical sense. Moreover, according to the view proposed here, Leibniz's version of substance monism is compatible with his version of substance pluralism.

1. Substance monism

Leibniz's most straightforward statement of substance monism can be found in his paper *Quod ens perfectum sit possibile*:

"It can easily be demonstrated that all things are distinguished, not as substances, (i.e., radically) but as modes. This can be demonstrated from the fact that, of those things which are radically distinct, one can be perfectly understood without another; that is, all the requisites of the one can be understood without all the requisites of the other being understood. But in the case of things, this is not so; for since the ultimate reason of things is unique, and contains by itself the aggregate of all requisites of all things, it is evident that the requisites of all things are the same. So also is their essence, given that an essence is the aggregate of all primary requisites. Therefore the essence of all things is the same, and things differ only modally, just as a town seen from a high point differs from the town seen from a plain. If only those things are really different which can be separated, or, of which one can be perfectly understood without the other, it follows that no thing really differs from another, but that all things are one, just as Plato argues in the *Parmenides*"³.

This passage is the most important source for the interpretations of Kulstad, Wilson, and Brown. In part, Wilson's interpretation is also based on a passage of the *Excerpts from Notes on Science and Metaphysics* where Leibniz seems to be endorsing the Aristotelian-Averroist doctrine of a universal intellect: "In sum, just as there is something divine in space, namely the immeasurability of God, so there is something divine in the mind, which Aristotle used to call the active intellect, and this is the same as the omniscience of God; [...]"⁴. Finally, in *De origine rerum ex formis* Leibniz sets forth a version of a neo-platonic emanation theory. There, he says that the origin of things from God seems to follow a combinatorial pattern: things come into being by God's combining simple ideas ('simple forms'): "It seems to me that the origin of things from God is of the same kind as the origin of properties from an essence; just as $6 = 1 + 1 + 1 + 1 + 1 + 1$, [...]"⁵.

"God", as Leibniz says in the same text, "is the subject of all absolute simple forms"⁶ (where 'absolute' means as much as 'affirmative'). This theory of the origin of existing things may seem to imply that minds are nothing other than combinations of simple ideas in the mind of God. In that case, Leibniz's

3 A VI, 3, 573; translated in *G. W. Leibniz: De Summa Rerum. Metaphysical Papers, 1675-1676* (= *The Yale Leibniz*), ed. and trans. by G. H. R. Parkinson, New Haven – London 1992 (hereafter PDSR), pp. 93-95.

4 A VI, 3, 391; PDSR, p. 43.

5 A VI, 3, 518; PDSR, p. 77.

6 A VI, 3, 519; PDSR, p. 79.

view of the origin of things would come very close to Spinoza's view of the mind as an 'idea'⁷. In fact, Wilson reads this passage in a purely spinozistic sense⁸. She also draws attention to the fact that Leibniz in a fragment of 1668 explicitly embraces a monistic neo-platonic emanation theory leading to the consequence that ideas in the mind of God and the 'substances of things' (or their 'substantial forms') are equivalent⁹: "From this it is apparent that there is not one substantial form for all bodies but a different one for different bodies, for as the disposition of nature is varied, the form and idea are also varied"¹⁰. In the Supplement to this text, Leibniz even says that "substances of things are the same in fact, different in relation; they are, moreover, as action and passion. [...] the substances of things are the act of God on species"¹¹.

A similar statement can also be found in *De arcanis sublimium vel de summa rerum*, where Leibniz says that the perfect mind or God is like the soul of the material world: "It seems that there is some centre of the entire universe, [...]; also some most perfect mind, or God. This mind, like a soul, exists as a whole in the whole body of the world; [...]"¹².

2. Leibniz's anti-averroism

Although these passages seem to support the thesis that Leibniz's ontology in 1675-1676 includes a version of an averroistic theory of a single active intellect, a passage from *De origine rerum ex formis* points in another direction. There, Leibniz develops a more complicated view of the relation between ideas in the mind of God and things existing in the world, and explicitly excludes an Averroist reading of the concept of a universal active intellect:

"Just as space is to the immeasurable, so is the collection of all minds to the active intellect. [...] God is not a part of our mind, just as the immeasurable is not a part of some place or interval. [...] Just as there is already a shape in the immeasurable before it is marked out, so there is already an idea, i.e. a differentia of thoughts, in the primary intelligence. Just as a shape is in space, so is an idea in our mind. There is no soul of the world, because a continuum cannot be composed of minds, [...]"¹³.

This passage shows clearly that for Leibniz ideas in the mind of God belong to the necessary conditions for the existence of minds without being parts of existing minds. More generally, shortly after one of his seemingly averroistic

7 Cf. Spinoza: *Ethics*, part 2, proposition 12; Spinoza: *Opera*, ed. by C. Gerhardt, 4 vols., Heidelberg 1925 (reprint in 5 vols. Heidelberg 1972-1987), vol. 2, pp. 41-308, p. 95.

8 Cf. Wilson: "Atoms, Minds and Vortices in *De Summa Rerum*" (see note 1), p. 227.

9 *Ibid.*, pp. 224-227.

10 "De transsubstantiatione"; A VI, 1, 511-512; translated in *G. W. Leibniz: Philosophical Papers and Letters*, trans. and ed. by L. E. Loemker, Dordrecht 1969 (hereafter Loemker), p. 118.

11 A VI, 1, 513; Loemker, p. 119.

12 A VI, 3, 474; PDSR, p. 25.

13 A VI, 3, 520-521; PDSR, pp. 79-81.

statements concerning the active intellect, Leibniz says: "There is in matter, as there is in space, something eternal and indivisible; which seems to have been understood by those who believed that God himself is the matter of things. But this is not said correctly, for God does not form a part of things; instead, he is their principle"¹⁴.

In *De origine rerum ex formis*, Leibniz also sketches an ontological pattern in which existing particulars clearly are more than combinations of ideas in the intellect of God:

"Things are not produced by the mere combination of forms in God, but along with a subject also. The subject itself, or God, together with his ubiquity, gives the immeasurable, and this immeasurable combined with other subjects brings it about that all possible modes, or things, follow in it. The various results of forms, combined with a subject, bring it about that particulars result"¹⁵.

Here, Leibniz tries to supplement a neo-platonic emanation scheme with a theory of a plurality of subjects. These subjects have the function to be the substrata of something that Leibniz regards as the 'results of forms' (*resultantia ex formis*) in God. In this way, Leibniz's rejection of an averroistic conception of the active intellect and his emphasis on the role of subjects leads to a refined version of substance monism.

3. The plurality of minds

One of the most famous consequences of Spinoza's substance monism is the doctrine that the mind is the idea of the body¹⁶. Leibniz's early reactions to Spinoza's theory of mind therefore give insights into the degree in which his ontology diverges from Spinoza's substance monism. In *De origine rerum ex formis*, Leibniz says the mind cannot be the idea of the body because, while the body is continuously changing, the mind remains the same¹⁷. In a further reading note to Spinoza's *Ethics*, he points out that Spinoza's thesis that the object of the idea that constitutes the human mind is nothing other than the human body¹⁸ makes a mind a momentary entity¹⁹. It is not easy to make out what argument Leibniz may exactly have had in mind here. According to the lemmas following proposition 13 of part 2, the identity of a complex material object is always a matter of degree, depending on the degree of constancy of the relation of motion and rest among its parts²⁰. This means that complex material

14 A VI, 3, 392; PDSR, p. 45.

15 A VI, 3, 523; PDSR, p. 85.

16 Cf. *Ethics*, part 2, proposition 12; Spinoza: *Opera* (see note 7), p. 95.

17 Cf. A VI, 3, 518; PDSR, p. 75.

18 Cf. *Ethics*, part 2, proposition 13; Spinoza: *Opera* (see note 7), p. 96.

19 Cf. A VI, 4 B, 1714.

20 Cf. *Ethics*, part 2, lemma 3, definition; part 2, lemma 7, scholium; Spinoza: *Opera* (see note 7), pp. 99-100 and pp. 101-102.

objects such as human bodies, due to the continuous change of internal microstructure, are momentary entities. In case minds are individuated via the bodies they are the idea of, minds also have in a strict sense only a momentary existence.

By contrast, Leibniz approaches the problem of individuation via the problem of consciousness. Lee C. Rice has convincingly argued that in Spinoza the theory of reflexive ideas (*ideae idearum*) is to be read as a theory of consciousness²¹. According to the theory of reflexive ideas, every idea is simultaneously accompanied by an idea of it, which differs from it only through a ‘formal’ mode of presentation: the idea of an idea is nothing other than this idea considered without its relation to represented objects²². Consciousness, for Leibniz, does not simply consist in the ‘formal’ mode of presentation of an idea, but itself has a temporal structure: Consciousness is the present perception of a previous perception²³:

“In our mind there is a perception or sense of itself, as of a certain particular thing. This is always in us, for as often as we use a word, we recognize that immediately. As often as we wish, we recognize that we perceive our thoughts; that is, we recognize that we thought a short time ago. Therefore intellectual memory consists in this: not *what* we have perceived, but *that* we have perceived – that we are those who have sensed”²⁴.

“I have not yet explained satisfactorily how there come about these different beats of the mind, with that constantly reciprocated reflection [...]. They seem to occur by the distinguishing awareness of the corporeal intention; but, if you observe carefully, that beat only brings it about that you remember that you had this – namely, the reflection of a reflection – in the mind a little before, [...]”²⁵.

This temporal structure of consciousness, in turn, is the basis for three important claims about the nature of mind. The first claim is that a mind cannot perish as long as consciousness persists, and – because consciousness always exists – minds cannot perish at all: “[...] the perception of a perception to infinity is perpetually in the mind, and in that there consists its existence *per se*, and the necessity of the continuation”²⁶. Leibniz contrasts this conception of the continuation of the mind with Spinoza’s: Only under the condition of continuation of consciousness, but not under the condition of continuation of an idea as an abstract entity, does it make sense, according to Leibniz, to strive for moral perfection²⁷. The second claim connected with Leibniz’s analysis of consciousness is that minds have identity over time: As long as consciousness persists,

21 Cf. L. C. Rice: “Reflexive Ideas in Spinoza”, in: *Journal of the History of Philosophy* 28 (1990), pp. 201-211.

22 Cf. *Ethics*, part 2, proposition 21, scholium; Spinoza: *Opera* (see note 7), p. 109.

23 Cf. “De veritatibus, de mente, de Deo, de universo”; A VI, 3, 509; PDSR, pp. 59-61; and “De reminiscencia et de reflexione mentis in se ipsum”; A VI, 3, 515; PDSR, pp. 73-75.

24 A VI, 3, 509; PDSR, pp. 59-61.

25 A VI, 3, 517; PDSR, pp. 73-75.

26 A VI, 3, 517; PDSR, p. 75.

27 Cf. A VI, 3, 510; PDSR, pp. 61-63.

the mind remains numerically “the same”²⁸. The third claim based on the analysis of consciousness is that minds are the only true unities in nature, and that the unity of a body is derived from that of a mind²⁹. Leibniz seems to regard his views on unity as a consequence of that on identity and duration:

“If this is the nature of the mind, and it consists in the sense of itself, then I do not see how that sense can be impeded or destroyed. Furthermore, since (as I said a little before) the identity of the mind is not destroyed by some modifications, it cannot therefore be destroyed by any, as can easily be shown. So my opinion is this: that the solidity or unity of the body comes from the mind; [...]”³⁰.

Thus, for Leibniz, there is a plurality of minds that have a number of interesting characteristics: they are more than ideas of their bodies; they persist over time, have identity, and are the only true unities in the world.

4. Substance as ‘res agens’

A fourth claim associated with Leibniz's analysis of consciousness is that the mind is an active thing. In a famous reading note to proposition 12 of part 2 of Spinoza's *Ethics*, Leibniz points out that the mind is active, whereas ideas are not: “Ideas do not act. The mind acts. [...] The world is one, and yet minds are diverse. The mind therefore does not come into being through the idea of the body, but because God sees the world in various ways [...]”³¹.

Activity, in turn, is connected with substantiality already in the early work of Leibniz. His theory of substance as ‘res agens’ can be found as early as 1672 in the *Demonstratio substantiarum incorporearum*. There, he defines substance as whatever is active (“*Substantia est, quicquid agit*”³²), and makes clear that this applies to corporeal substances as well as to incorporeal ones: “A body is a substance the action of which is to be moved or to change its place (or at least to strive, or to begin a motion). [...] An incorporeal substance is one the action of which is one other than a change of place”³³. In a paper of the same period (ca. 1673-1675), Leibniz repeats this concept of substance: “To the notion of extension or variation, one has to add action. Consequently, the body is an extended active thing [Agens extensum]: one could say, it is an extended substance, provided that all substance be taken to act, and all active thing [agens] be called substance”³⁴.

28 A VI, 3, 509; PDSR, p. 61.

29 Cf. A VI, 3, 509-510; PDSR, pp. 59-63.

30 A VI, 3, 509; PDSR, p. 61.

31 A VI, 4 B, 1713; my translation.

32 A VI, 3, 74.

33 Ibid.; my translation.

34 “De vera methodo philosophiae et theologiae ac de natura corporis”; A VI, 3, 158; my translation.

However, what does the activity of the mind consist in? In *De unione animae et corporis*, Leibniz uses the concept of reflection for an analysis of the activity of the mind: “we do not act as a simple machine, but out of reflection, i.e., of action on ourselves”³⁵.

More generally, Leibniz regards thinking as an action of a thinking person on herself. Every thought, having an idea as its object, has the same reflective structure as consciousness, and, therefore, the same function for the continuation of a mind: “Thought, or the sensation of oneself, or action on oneself, is necessarily continued”³⁶. In this way, the analysis of thinking and consciousness leads to the concept of substance as an ‘active thing’: “Thought is not duration, but that which thinks is something that endures. And this is the difference between substance and forms”³⁷.

Consequently, the conscious, thinking, and enduring mind, for Leibniz, is not only a true unity but also a substance in a technical sense. The plurality of minds stressed in his early reactions to Spinoza’s theory of mind, therefore, amounts to a plurality of substances. Thus, the concept of substance as ‘active thing’ implies a form of substance pluralism in a perfectly technical sense.

5. Substance and substances

This leads to the paradoxical result that Leibniz in 1675-1676 clearly advocates a form of substance pluralism while, equally clearly, also advocating a form of substance monism. Does this mean that his metaphysical writings of these years simply are resistant to systematic interpretation, or can his seemingly divergent views be reconciled in some way?

A passage from Descartes’ *Principia philosophiae* may give a hint as to what Leibniz may have had in mind. There, Descartes tries to combine substance monism with substance pluralism by using a strategy of disambiguation. On the one hand, if ‘substance’ stands for a thing that does not require another thing for its existence only God can be called a substance. On the other hand, Descartes wants to maintain his theory of extended and thinking substances. The solution he proposes is that ‘substance’ is not said univocally of God and things in the world³⁸.

In a very similar way, in Leibniz’s metaphysical papers of 1675-1676 two unequivocal concepts of substance are at work. On the one hand, the concept of substance as ‘independent being’ applies only to God. God is the unique substance in the sense of ‘independent being’. Things in the world are ‘modes’

35 A VI, 3, 480; PDSR, p. 37.

36 A VI, 3, 588; PDSR, p. 113.

37 A VI, 3, 514; PDSR, p. 69.

38 Cf. *Principia* I, § 51; *Œuvres de Descartes*, ed. by Ch. Adam and P. Tannery, 13 vols., Paris 1897-1913, reprint Paris 1982-1991, vol. IX, p. 47. Cf. Leibniz’s reading note on this passage of the *Principia*: A VI, 3, 215.

in the sense that they are dependent beings, but not in the sense that they are parts of the ideas in the divine intellect. Minds are not parts of a universal active intellect, and particulars are more than combinations of ideas in the mind of God. On the other hand, the concept of substance as 'active thing' does not require causal independence of substances. In his early metaphysical papers, Leibniz even explicitly denies the causal independence of minds³⁹. The only requirement is that there has to be a kind of action of the mind on itself, in thought or in the reflective acts of consciousness. Minds are substances in the sense of 'active things'. Leibniz extends his concept of substance as 'active thing' to God, when he says that also God 'is a mind, a person, a substance'⁴⁰. Consequently, for Leibniz, there is at least one concept of substance that can be equivocally predicated of things in the world and of God. However, this is not the concept of substance which his version of substance monism is built upon. It is this play with two unequivocal concepts of substance, together with an appropriate adjustment of the theory of substance monism, that make the claim that there is only one substance (in the sense of 'independent being') compatible with the claim that there are many substances (in the sense of 'active things').

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39 Cf. A VI, 3, 516; PDSR, p. 71.

40 Cf. A VI, 3, 474-475; PDSR, p. 27.