

LEIBNIZ'S MONADS VIS-À-VIS THE IMMORTALITY OF THE SOUL: A COMPARATIVE APPROACH

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Abstract

Gottfried Wilhelm von Leibniz published little during his lifetime, and his philosophical masterpiece, *Monadology* is such a triumph of succinct expression that, to fully interpret it, one must look at many other works and to his correspondence, in order to know the detailed arguments which underlie its conclusions. Leibniz raised a problem in his attempt to compare his monads with the human soul, sharing the same features of immortality. Philosophers are divided in this idea, while some refute it as illogical, some still accept it though with a pinch of salt, saying that he is not the originator of the idea. However, I salute his courage for taken such a bold step in making this delicate comparison of the monads and souls' immortality. It is also worthy of note that more philosophers have written on the immortality of the soul but the most classical of them all is that of Thomas Aquinas. The importance of this work is to help us understand the deep relationship between the monads and the human souls. To achieve this, the method of comparative analysis of the ideas is going to be used, giving it an interpretation to discover the strength of Leibniz's argument and his flaws. Solution to the flaws will be proffered.

Keywords: Monads, Soul, Immortality, Substance

Introduction

Interpretation of Leibniz is made doubly difficult by the fact that he changed his mind about certain of his most influential ideas during the course of his lifetime, while remaining obstinately attached to them and unable overtly to reject them. Thus the picture to be obtained from reading the earlier works such as *Discourse on Metaphysics* is different from that obtained from the mature *Monadology*, or the posthumous *New Essays*. In this brief summary, I shall tend more in the direction of the later Leibniz,

while drawing on the earlier writings wherever these seem to be illuminating.

The Man

Gottfried Wilhelm von Leibniz (1646–1716) shared with Newton the discovery of the calculus, and contributed the concept of kinetic energy to mechanics. He was accomplished in history, law, chemistry, geology and mechanics, made many incidental scientific discoveries of importance, was a tireless politician and courtier, founded the Academy of Berlin, wrote fluently in French, German and Latin, corresponded with every man of genius from whom he could learn, and produced a philosophical system of astonishing power and originality, which provided the basis of German academic philosophy throughout the century following his death. Embedded in this system are the foundations of a new logic, and, with the discoveries of modern logic, interest in the thought of Leibniz has been reawakened. But so fertile was his mind, and so prodigious his output, that even now many of his writings are unpublished, and few scholars can claim familiarity with every aspect of his thought.

Substances and Individuals

Leibniz quoted by Stumpf (1994:224) was dissatisfied with the way Descartes and Spinoza had described the nature of substance because “he felt they had distorted our understanding of human nature, freedom, and the nature of God”.

Spinoza’s thesis that all apparent individuals are merely ‘modes’ of the one substance is inherently paradoxical. For the distinction between substance and mode derives in part from the ancient attempt to distinguish individuals from their properties. Spinoza seems to have abolished individuals from his world-view, reducing them to properties of something that is neither individual nor universal but a strange metaphysical hybrid: a universal with a single instance. Leibniz’s philosophy arose from the attempt to provide a concept of the individual substance, and to use it to

describe a plural universe—indeed, a universe in which there is not one substance but infinitely many.

Spinoza argues for human immortality; but he concludes that we survive only in part, dispersed in the infinite mind of God. Leibniz, translated by Robert Latta (2004:70) also believed in immortality; but immortality would be worthless, he thought, “ if it did not involve the survival of the soul”. And the soul is an individual, something which is numerically the same at one time as it was or will be at other times. But what exactly *is* an individual? What is the distinction between the individual and its properties, and what do we mean by saying that this individual is identical with the one I saw last week? These are the deep and difficult questions that Leibniz placed on the agenda of modern philosophy.

Monads

Leibniz is of the opinion that compound substance is the collection of monads. *Monas* is a Greek word which signifies unity or that which is one... Simple substances, lives, souls, spirits are unities. Consequently all nature is full of life. Every entity is either composite or simple, and simple entities do not contain parts. It is the simple entities that are the true substances, from which all other things are composed. These simple entities cannot be extended in space, since everything extended is also divisible. They are not to be confused, therefore, with the atoms of physical theory, and can best be understood in terms of their one accessible instance—the human soul, which is neither extended nor divisible, and which seems to be self-contained, simple and durable in exactly the way that a substance must be. Such basic individuals Leibniz called ‘monads’; and although the soul is our clearest example, there are and must be other kinds of monads, which do not share our distinguishing attributes of rationality and self-consciousness.

According to S.Roger (2002:66) Leibniz’s theory of monads (the ‘monadology’) contains three parts, being the theories of the monad, of the aggregates of monads and of the appearances of

monads. These tend in three separate directions, and much ingenuity was needed in order to attempt a reconciliation. The theory of the monad can be briefly summarized in the following six propositions:

1. Monads are not extended in space.
2. Monads are distinguished from one another by their properties (their ‘predicates’).
3. No monad can come into being or pass away in the natural course of things; a monad is created or annihilated only by a ‘miracle’.
4. The predicates of a monad are ‘perceptions’—i.e. mental states—and the objects of these mental states are ideas. Inanimate entities are in fact the appearances of animated things: aggregates of monads, each endowed with perceptions.
5. Not all perceptions are conscious. The conscious perceptions, or apperceptions, are characteristic of rational souls, but not of lesser beings. And even rational souls have perceptions of which they are not conscious.
6. ‘Monads have no windows’—that is, nothing is passed to them from outside; each of their states is generated from their own inner nature.

This does not mean that monads do not interact; but it does mean that certain theories as to *how* individual substances interact are untenable. Those propositions follow, Leibniz thinks, from the very idea of an individual substance, once the idea is taken seriously. But they can also be derived independently, from certain metaphysical principles which it would be absurd to question.

Activity and *Vis Viva*

Monads are individuated in God’s mind by their complete notions. But the complete notion merely lists the predicates of a monad and says nothing about the link between them. Looked at in another

way, each monad can be seen as a centre of activity, whose perceptions are generated successively by a living force, or *vis viva*. Like Spinoza, Leibniz was impressed by the substantial unity of organic beings, and believed that we observe in them, from another perspective, the individuality that is revealed in a timeless way to God. He sometimes writes of the *conatus* of individual substances and defended a theory of dynamics which gave pride of place to the living force in things, as opposed to the ‘dead force’ or momentum that features in Cartesian physics. In defending this idea, Leibniz introduced the concept of kinetic energy into mechanics, and thereby set physics on a new path.

Leibniz also refers to the activity of monads in another sense, familiar from Spinoza: a monad is active to the extent that its ideas are ‘distinct’, passive to the extent that they are ‘confused’. To understand this aspect of Leibniz we must turn to the theory of aggregates.

Aggregates of Monads

In speaking of organic things we are not, as a rule, talking of individual monads. Every living organism is an aggregate of many monads. What binds them together, and what enables us to speak of *one* organism, when we have a plurality of simple individuals? It seems that the original problem that motivated Leibniz—the problem of accounting for the actual individuals in our world—remains with him. Leibniz has recourse to the theory of ideas, which he inherited from Descartes. Each monad has perceptions or knowledge, which may be more or less clear and distinct, and more or less adequate. Hence Descartes(1993:275) wrote

When I can recognise a thing from among others without being able to say what its differences or properties consist in, the knowledge is *confused*. It is in this way that we sometimes know something *clearly*, without being in any doubt

whether a poem or a picture is done well or badly, simply because it has a certain something, I know not what, that satisfies or offends us. But when I can explain the marks which I have, the knowledge is called *distinct*. And such is the knowledge of the assayer, who discerns the true from the false by means of certain tests or marks which make up the definition of gold.

Distinctness, so defined, admits of degrees, since the notions that enter into the definition of something themselves stand in need of definition. Only when everything that enters into the definition of a thing is known distinctly, can the knowledge of the thing be called *adequate*.

What then is the relation between an idea and its object? For example, what happens when I perceive something? Nothing is passed to me from the thing perceived; yet there is a sense in which all my perceptions represent the world around me. They do this because the predicates of other monads unfold in harmony with mine: each of my perceptions corresponds to perceptions in surrounding monads and enables me to infer, with a greater or less amount of confusion, what is going on in them. This is guaranteed by another Leibnizian principle:

The Principle of Pre-established Harmony: Each monad has a ‘point of view’ on the world, defined by the totality of its perceptions; and because our perceptions evolve in harmony with each other, my perceptions can be treated as representations of the objective order.

Another way of putting this is to say that each monad ‘mirrors’ the universe from its own point of view. As Leibniz translated by Robert Latta (2004:70) writes in the *Monadology*:

The interconnection or accommodation of all created things to each other, and each to all the others, brings it about that each simple substance has relations that express all the others, and consequently, that each simple substance is a perpetual living mirror of the universe.

How are Monads Related?

Such influence as there is between monads is only ‘ideal’, an effect of God’s ceaseless intervention. Nevertheless, monads can have a more or less clear idea of each other and of their situation—as I have a clear idea of my body, even though I do not know how it is composed, and therefore even though my idea of my body is not distinct. The varying clarity and distinctness of our perceptions can be understood as defining the ‘distance’ between us and surrounding things. And we can speak of being ‘affected’ by those things, to the extent that our perceptions give us a clear idea of them.

In each organism there is a ‘dominant monad’, distinguished by the clarity of its perceptions of all the others; and this dominant monad is the source of the organism’s unity. Leibniz, following Aristotle, describes this dominant monad as the form or ‘entelechy’ of the body; it is the animating principle or soul. In some way that Leibniz does not succeed in explaining, it binds the aggregate of monads into a quasi-substantial unity: it provides a *vinculum substantiale*—a ‘substantial chain’—making a new quasi-individual from the simple individuals of the human body.

The Appearance of Monads

That is confusing enough. But matters are made worse by Leibniz's growing conviction that the appearance of the world is organized and understood in ways that do not represent the underlying reality. The familiar world around us appears ordered in space and time; it contains extended and durable things, which interact and obey causal laws. Yet monads are not extended—perhaps they are not 'in time' in the way that physical objects are. Moreover, they do not interact in the way that physical objects appear to interact, according to causal laws which are established *a posteriori*, by observation of the physical world. Such laws do not describe the activities of monads, but only the regular connections in the world of appearance, which are the by-product of transformations most of which we do not observe.

The Soul and Immortality

As we said earlier in the abstract, following S. E. Frost (1989:153) philosophers vary in their views about the immortality of the soul, influenced by their different backgrounds and cultures. One may then ask: "Is death the end of human existence? Or is there more for man in a land beyond the grave? Can we find in man a soul, something distinct from his body, which can survive the event of death and live eternally?"

In attempting an answer to this big question, the early Greek philosophers thought of the soul as the least material form of the particular substance out of which everything in the universe was made. For Anaximenes - Air, for Heraclitus – Fire, for the Atomists – Atoms and so on. Plato and Plotinus were of the opinion that the goal of the soul is to free itself from the body prison in order that it may see truth clearly. Aristotle brought in a classification of the soul, saying that soul is to be found wherever there is life and since everywhere in nature are to be found signs of life, souls must be throughout nature. He upholds that if we examine nature, we will find a series of souls beginning with the lowest or plant souls and moving upwards to the highest or human souls. The position of the

later Greek thinkers was that the soul is composed of atoms just like all other things in the universe.

The early and medieval Christians were of a contrary view. They taught that the soul was immortal but continued to live in a resurrected body. Death for them was not a separation of the body and soul, rather a purification of the body so that it might be a fit place for the soul to dwell in throughout eternity. This point of view was developed further by Augustine who taught that man is a union of soul and body. But, for him, the body is a prison house of the soul, the source of all evil. The soul, on the other hand, is immaterial (not made of matter) and is wholly different and distinct from the body. Although he taught that the soul directs and forms the body, he was unable to tell how this happens. Further, Augustine quoted by S.E. Frost (1989:153) taught that:

Each individual has his own soul, and that it is not an emanation from God. A soul came into being, it continued to live forever. The human soul is, for Augustine, immortal, nevertheless, the life of the soul after the death of the body may be either happy or miserable, depending upon how the individual lived during his earthly existence. If during this earthly existence he has won the favor of God, he is given blessedness. If not, he is eternally condemned to misery.

Thomas Aquinas was the philosopher who brought this general point of view into a complete and thorough statement. He taught that the human soul was created by God. This soul was, for him, immaterial, the intellectual and vital principle of the body. This intellectual soul was added to the body at birth. While there are other souls, the human soul is different from all these in that it is intelligent and can will. "This intelligent soul, following S.E. Frost (1989:153) is not dependent upon the body for its existence or functioning, but can continue to act after the body has perished. Further, the soul

Nnadiabube Journal of Philosophy, Vol. 2 (2), 2018 continues to exist just as it did while the body was alive. Thus, it forms for itself a new body, a spiritual body through which it functions throughout eternity”.

The attempt to break with the past is clearly seen in the writings of Francis Bacon. He taught that the human soul was actually two souls, one divine or rational and the other irrational. The divine soul was, he held, a matter for religion to handle. The irrational soul, however, was open to study and understanding by men using the methods of science. Hobbes broke completely with the past. He held that the entire universe was material and that in such a universe there could be nothing corresponding to the human soul as described by earlier philosophers. His materialistic position left no room for an immaterial soul that could survive the disintegration of the body.

The views of Descartes and Spinoza were more subtle. Descartes felt that the logical result of science was a mechanical and materialistic universe, but he was equally certain that this was not the complete explanation of the universe. Consequently, he was anxious to discover a way by which he could take account of all that science seemed to demand and at the same time hold to the existence of the human soul. The result of this desire was his theory of one absolute substance, God, and two relative substance, mind and body. Having made this distinction, it was easy for him to maintain that the soul was distinct from the body and therefore not subject of the same laws as the body.

The soul, Descartes (1993:277) taught, “is a unit or single principle which expresses itself in numerous ways. Among these are willing, feeling, and reasoning. Thus, the soul is seen as acting and also as having passions”. Since this soul is part of the whole, part of God or absolute substance, it cannot be thought of as disappearing, but continues as long as God continues. Death of the body is but a change, and the soul, being free of the body and never actually influenced by it, is not affected by its disintegration. Although Descartes held that God is the only substance, he felt it necessary to

make a clear separation between soul and body and thus he left an ultimate dualism. This did not satisfy his followers. Two ways of solving the problem were easily evident. On the one hand, a philosopher might turn away from the body and concentrate upon the soul. Malebranche did just this. The soul was, for him the only reality, and what we think of the body is merely an idea of the body in the soul. This is pure idealism. Hobbes has taken the other position: to deny the existence of the soul and concentrate upon a materialistic view of the universe.

It remained for Spinoza to offer a solution of the problem without sacrificing either the result of natural science or the soul. Since, for him, God was the only substance, the soul could be nothing else than a mode of God. As such, it was identified with the spiritual side of the universe. Soul was perceived when one look at substance from the side of mind rather than from the side of body. Thus, it was subject only to spiritual laws and not to the laws of science or of the material world.

The souls, for John Locke are spiritual substances with the power of perceiving, thinking, and willing. Man arrives at the idea of soul by combining the various operations of the human mind, such as willing, knowing, and the like, and supposing a support for them. This support or ground is soul substance. That the soul is immortal, lives after death of the body, is, for Locke, a matter of faith, and not anything of which we can have a clear and distinct idea. It is above reasons, but can be believed on faith.

Hume, carrying the Lockean position to its logic conclusion, as he saw it, held that we can have no certain knowledge either of material or spiritual substance. We cannot know that either the outer world or the soul exists. All we know is that there is a succession of ideas, one following another. That there is a ground or support of these ideas, a soul which has them, cannot be known. Thus, any idea of the immortality of the soul is wholly without foundation and cannot be accepted. This line of reasoning was pure skepticism. As such it could not satisfy thinking men. Rather than accept it at its face value,

philosophers were certain that somewhere along the line reaching from Locke to Hume there was something wrong, something important omitted. Thus, they set about searching for the mistake, the missing part which would make an entirely different picture.

The position of Leibniz seemed to offer more promise than the skepticism of Hume. The universe, for Leibniz, is composed of an infinite number of monads or units of force. Even the soul is such a substance, a unit of spiritual force. Indeed, the soul atom is the model of all monads in the universe.

Evaluation

Leibniz is a rationalist like Descartes and Spinoza for he connected the psychological origin of idea of substance with self-consciousness. For F. Copleston (2004:295) quoting Leibniz, “to think a colour and to observe that one thinks it are two different thoughts, as different as is the colour from the ego which thinks it”.

Each substance or monad is the principle and source of its activity. Monads combine to form compounds but how is it that extended body results from a union of some sort between un-extended monads? Monads for Leibniz are the real substances either the essence of things which cannot be physically perceived. Hence that suggests the idea of not being extended or divisible for they have no actual shape or size. According to D.E. Cooper, (1989:123), “Substance is in fact a tendentious translation of the term *Ousia* (being).” One can rightly predict then of the prior existence of the monads to any corporeal form. Leibnizian idea of substance presupposes the existence of accident.

The striking point to note here is the equation of these monads to “souls”. The Christian understanding of soul is that which mirrors God and never dies. It cannot be physically perceived but has consciousness (apperception). Hence Leibniz’s monad is a borrowed concept. Leibniz only borrowed this Christian concept when he said that monads mirror the universe of created things,

also that their coming into existence and being annihilated depend solely on the will of God.

Another big question is how these monads relate or influence themselves while having no windows and still being self sufficient. This question refreshes the perennial problem of one and many and unity in diversity. Consequently the independency and distinctiveness of monads does not suggest chaos or anarchy but a unity or harmony in diversity. Each monad behaves in accordance with its own created purpose and form different sides of one reality –God and the same thing is applicable to the soul.

Now since all ordinary substances are liable to destruction, there necessarily exists an eternal substance which guarantees the continuation of movement. As the source of movements, M.S. Cahn, (1991:129) concludes, “This mover cannot be moved. Moreover, since all material things are liable to destruction and can be moved, this eternal mover must be without matter”.

However Leibniz was wrong in insisting that monads cannot be affected by external principles. Things are affected and actually changed by that which is external to them irrespective of their internal principles. More so if monads represent souls and vice versa, Leibniz will fall into the same fallacy of over generalization as did Spinoza; that everything has soul, both animate and inanimate things and they all mirror God their creator, hence they are all gods. This landed him into pantheism for we all know that knowledge and reason differ us from animals.

More still the idea of God knowing the best possible world creates the idea of limitation in God. Thus, God seems not to be the creator of this world but only comes to the knowledge of it and brings into existence through His power, knowledge and will. Leibniz sets out to reconcile the dualism of soul and body as postulated by Descartes. For him the connection of body and soul forms a living person or the animal itself in an inseparable bond of unity. However, they follow different laws: “souls act according to the laws of final causes through appetite, ends and means while

bodies act according to the laws of efficient causes or emotions”. This implies according to A. Jolley (1995:5) that he is still in the dragnet of Descartes.

Furthermore the perceptions of individual monads harmonize, and the phenomenal world which they ‘perceive’ obtains coherence because of the pre-established harmony, according to which the histories of individual monads proceed according to successive ‘mirrorings’ of the whole of things. God established this harmony at the creation, monads then proceeding according to their own individual inner momentum, yet in such a way as to share the collective illusion of a common physical world, in which they participate and of which they have experiential knowledge. Once established, the harmony proceeds forever: it no more needs the intervention of God to see that the laws of the universe appear to be obeyed from any particular point of view, than it needs the intervention of the watchmaker to ensure that two perfectly made watches, once wound up, will go on keeping time.

He criticized John Locke’s attack on the doctrine innate ideas and this idea identifies him as a rationalist. For him there is nothing in the senses that is not first in the intellect or in the world of ideas. The logic will be contradictory if it flows otherwise. The interesting result of this is that, having tried to reconcile the rationalist concept of substance with the common-sense concept of an individual, Leibniz ends by saying that the apparent individuals in our world are for the most part not individuals at all. Moreover, he is unable to give a coherent account of the fact that they nevertheless appear to be individuals. No example of a monad presents itself, save the individual soul. And yet the soul is as much outside the natural order (the order of well-founded phenomena) as every other substantial thing.

Conclusion

From our discussion so far, we have been able to discover the relationship between the monads and the souls according to Leibniz. Since they share the qualities on being uncreated and unextended,

immorality for sure will be their result, in their job of mirroring God. Although the theory of monads is the most famous version of Leibniz's metaphysics, it makes a relatively late appearance in his philosophical career, even the term 'monad' in the sense which became standard for Leibniz does not appear in his writings before 1665. Hence this suggests that the idea is not entirely his but borrowed from earlier philosophers across the ages. Nevertheless, he made a tremendous inroad into the understanding of the 'monad' concept with his juxtaposition of it with human soul. Therefore the big question for Leibniz is whether the monads are the same with the human soul or simply similar to each other and differ at some point. And if the latter is the case, his claim is no longer valid. In comparing monad to the soul, he made his concept of monad an appendage of the concept of the soul. In so doing, the theory of monad is an imperfect theory that leans on the idea of immortality of the soul for its survival. It poses a big problem which Leibniz never solved. He projected an imperfect theory that needed a more perfect concept (soul) to exist. Why then come up with the concept of monad when the concept of the soul is more holistic? These are issues Leibniz never considered in his philosophical task. He therefore made it more complex and difficult than it was before the advent of his theory.

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