

## Reply to Sarah Tietz

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It is extremely gratifying to read such a careful and thorough review of my book. At one time I had feared that its central topic would be perceived as too recondite to warrant reading the book at all. But much to my surprise not only has Sarah Tietz (as well as other reviewers) read the book, she has done so carefully and rigorously, and, most importantly to me, has grasped and explained in her own compelling terms why this topic is in fact important for understanding Leibniz's philosophy as a whole. This sort of deep engagement with the concerns of the book leaves me with the happy sense that it was a book worth writing.

I do not believe that there are any claims made in the book that are mischaracterized in Tietz's summary. Most of the claims win her support, and her concerns about the few that don't are certainly not out of line.

There are two principal concerns. One has to do with the distinction between the organic body and the corporeal substance, and whether a consideration of each or either of these is sufficient to pick out a single individual entity. The other has to do with the relationship between Leibniz's metaphysical commitments on the one hand and his interest in the implications of empirical data on the other.

As to the first concern, it will help to begin by recalling that in the book I argue, at length and against the advice of a number of scholars, that for Leibniz organic bodies or divine machines are not the same thing as corporeal substances, that the latter are organic bodies considered together with a soul or dominant monad that unifies them, and that these two sorts of entity can be, as Leibniz puts it, conceptually *pris à part* from one another, even if in reality the one never occurs without the other. I will not argue for this view again here, but will only reiterate that it is well supported by a careful reading of the texts. But Tietz raises an interesting question about the conceptually distinct organic body, namely, whether I am justified in claiming that it gives us enough to identify it as a single individual organic body, rather than as a mass or aggregate of parts that function together in a reciprocal fashion.

Certainly, if the organic body is considered on its own, then it is indeed impossible for the observer to identify something with full metaphysical unity, since it is only the perceptual activity of the dominant monad implicated in the corporal substance, but not in the organic body, that confers this. The only other possibility

is that the divine machine could be picked out in view of its infinite structure, but Tietz is worried that infinite structure cannot really be seen, since, presumably, any analysis of an infinitely structured body by a finite observer will only be able to pick out a finite number of parts or of levels of organization. This is correct, as far as it goes, but it does not seem to have worried Leibniz. He seems to have believed that the infinite complexity of an organic body was in fact something that could make itself known through empirical investigation; a clear example of this is in his distinction between geological formations that happen to resemble animals, on the one hand, and the fossils of real animals on the other.

Now when we distinguish between a fish fossil and a fish-like chunk of rock, we are not really perceiving any infinite structure in the former, yet Leibniz appears to suppose that *the more* one looks into the bodies of natural beings (or their paleontological traces), the more the *a priori* rational commitment to their ungenerability, indestructibility, and divinity, will be corroborated, and it follows of necessity from this trio of properties, for Leibniz, that the natural being will also be characterized by an infinite nestedness of parts. Increasingly, I am coming to think that Leibniz introduces infinity here as something of a fudge factor (comparable to the notion of ‘texture’ in other late 17<sup>th</sup>-century varieties of reformed or modified mechanism), doing the same work as other *je ne sais quois* such as animal spirits, plastic natures, or archaevi, yet enabling its defender to insist that he has no need of anything intermediate between soul and body that would distinguish animals ontologically from mere things. But the interpretative point still stands, that for Leibniz the infinite structure of organic bodies or divine machines is something of which we can be certain *a priori*, and which we can discern through the empirical study of nature even if we cannot actually count to infinity.

The exact balance between the empirical and the *a priori* is at the heart of Tietz’s second principal concern. This is a familiar concern among historians of philosophy, and it is difficult to know how to respond to it, without engaging in a lengthy methodological and metaphilosophical dialogue about how we should be approaching the projects of figures such as Leibniz who have gone down in history as, at least mainly, philosophers.

It is no doubt true that Leibniz himself would sometimes insist that empirical findings about the structure and origins of living beings could at most provide corroboration for what he already believed anyway on the basis of, as he put it, ‘higher reasons’. Yet how exactly we come to have precisely the higher reasons we have, and not other ones, surely has something to do with the reports we receive from

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empirical scientists about how the world in fact is. I take it that it is the task of the historian of philosophy –and this is something that sets him or her apart from non-historian colleagues— to measure the bald claims a historical figure makes (e.g., that higher reasons compel us to believe there is a preexisting body for every future animal) together with everything else that was going on in that figure’s time and place (e.g., the apparent discovery of the preexisting bodies of future animals, namely, spermatozoa), in order to offer the richest picture possible of *why* he made the claims he did. What we find when we do this is that there is a complex interplay between empirical evidence and higher principles, and it is a hopeless endeavor to try to separate these two out, let alone to elevate one over the other.

I don’t believe that we should dismiss Leibniz’s claim that it was higher principles that led him to adopt the commitments he did in his theory of organic body and corporeal substance, but I also don’t believe that the exact model he develops of these is one that could have flowed from the higher principles held by a philosopher in, say, the 5<sup>th</sup> century BCE. Leibniz’s rich and, some might say, baroque picture of the structure of the natural world had something to do with what people were talking about around him and with him, and among the hot topics of conversation in learned circles in late-17<sup>th</sup>-century Europe we can certainly include the discoveries of the microscopists.

These final remarks, I will conclude by saying, are made not at all against Tietz’s lucid review. Quite the contrary, I am grateful for the opportunity her review raises to return one more time to the always interesting question of methodology, and of the nature of our common project as historians of philosophy.

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