

Unity, Reality and Simple Substance: A Reply to Samuel Levey

Donald Rutherford, University of California San Diego

Samuel Levey's recent *Leibniz Review* article is a bold attempt to turn the tables on those who have regarded the theory of monads as the logical culmination of Leibniz's metaphysics.¹ If Levey is right, the theory of monads not only lacks a firm foundation in rational argument but its acceptance would have the consequence of undermining the coherence of Leibniz's philosophy. As Levey sees it, the theory of monads cannot be Leibniz's considered metaphysical position, because a commitment to the existence of simple substances presupposes a commitment to the existence of corporeal substances. Thus, affirming the exclusive existence of monads would negate the only rational grounds Leibniz has for that view. I contend that Levey has failed to make a persuasive case for this dramatic conclusion. Against him, I hold that the theory of monads can be understood as a coherent development of Leibniz's philosophy, and that it receives exactly the kind of argumentative support one would expect such a theory to have.

1. Preliminaries

Commentators have typically appealed to two types of arguments on behalf of the theory of monads. One hinges on what Levey labels the "Construction Problem." The Construction Problem challenges the idea that there could be composite corporeal substances in a world whose ultimate constituents are limited to monads. In brief, the reasoning is that, given Leibniz's account of the intrinsic properties of monads and of the relations among them, no multitude or aggregate of monads can possess the sort of true or *per se* unity that Leibniz demands of a substance.² Levey's response to the Construction Problem begins with an important concession: *if we grant that the ultimate constituents of reality are limited to monads, then Leibniz indeed faces a daunting problem in explaining the existence of corporeal substances. However, Levey argues that the Construction Problem by itself cannot underwrite Leibniz's case for simple substances, for the Construction Problem takes the theory of monads as a premise; hence it can provide no independent support for the truth of the theory (87).*

The second argument advanced on behalf of the theory of monads is the one Leibniz adumbrates in *Monadology*, sec. 2:

And there must be simple substances, since there are composites; for the composite is nothing other than a mass or *aggregate* of simples (GP VI, 607/AG 213).

Levey calls this the “direct argument,” and plausibly construes it as an extension of a line of reasoning that Leibniz relies on from at least the time of the Arnauld correspondence. That line of reasoning (the “borrowed reality argument”) builds on a claim about the ontological and explanatory priority of the one to the many. Whatever is an aggregate of many things, Leibniz argues, can only exist and be understood in terms of that which is a “true unity” or substance.³ The “borrowed reality argument” is a fixed point in Leibniz’s metaphysics. As Levey observes, however, although Leibniz sometimes presents it as an argument for the existence of monads, it does not strictly imply that. The argument entails that for any aggregate—a being whose existence is explained in terms of the relations of many things—there must be unities. Yet the argument makes no specific claim about the nature of those unities: they could be simple substances, but they could also be corporeal substances: composites that are “true unities,” “despite their division into parts” (67).

For the borrowed reality argument to deliver the conclusion of the *Monadology*, a further premise is needed: that any composite is nothing more than an aggregate. On the assumption that any composite is an aggregate, whose reality is limited to that of its constituents, we have the conclusion of the direct argument (68). But this additional premise, Levey contends, is not one that is entailed by the borrowed reality argument and not one for which Leibniz offers any independent support (69). Hence, we have not uncovered Leibniz’s grounds for maintaining that simple substances exist.

In Levey’s view, Leibniz’s “principal argument” for the existence of simple substances is one that grows out of his critique of Descartes’s theory of material substance and which, strikingly, takes as a premise the reality of corporeal substances as composite unities (unities that have parts but are not reducible to those parts). According to Levey, Leibniz’s reasoning runs as follows:

1. Some bodies are substances, i.e., *per se* unities.
2. Any body is actually infinitely divided into parts.
3. If the essence of body is, as Descartes holds, mere extension then any body is nothing but infinitely divided parts.
4. In that case, no body possesses the true unity of a substance, but at most the accidental unity of a being by aggregation.

5. But some bodies are substances (1); therefore, those bodies at least must possess an indivisible principle of unity, or form, in virtue of which their material parts, together with the form, constitute a single composite substance.

I will call this the “principles of unity argument.” From its conclusion, Levey sees Leibniz as making a series of intuitive leaps that lead him to the further conclusion that forms are substances in their own right:

6. The structure of any corporeal substance is that of an infinitely descending hierarchy of forms and aggregates of corporeal substances.
7. An analysis or resolution of this hierarchy terminates in an inventory of forms alone.
8. Because forms are indivisible, and because they are revealed to be the “elements” of any corporeal substance, from which its reality is derived, forms themselves must be simple substances.

Levey allows that Leibniz never explicitly formulates such an argument for simple substances, but he claims that textual evidence can be summoned in support of each of its steps. This is crucial, because in Levey’s view the steps articulate the path by which Leibniz is, in fact, led to assert the existence of simple substances (82, 86).

The status of this assertion is one of the points on which I wish to focus. Throughout Levey’s paper I find a blurring of the distinction between an account of the historical development of Leibniz’s views and the justification of those views—particularly as that justification is understood by Leibniz himself. Levey leaves no doubt about his own preference for a developmental account. Reading Leibniz’s philosophy “backwards,” he writes, “gives rise to a certain illusion about Leibniz’s reasons for simple substances.... Reading forward from his earlier works and following the order of discovery dispels that illusion and replaces it with a more complex view of his philosophy” (69-70). It is tempting to construe this simply as a claim about Leibniz’s philosophical development. Yet Levey is interested in defending a stronger thesis, namely, that the steps outlined above represent the only rational basis for Leibniz’s commitment to the existence of simple substances. The force of Levey’s conclusion is apparent, when he pulls his final rabbit out of the hat:

Since, as I see it, the existence of simple substances is accepted as a consequence of [Leibniz’s] analysis of corporeal substances into form-matter compounds, the doctrine of simple substances would be lost if the role of forms

as principles of unity were jettisoned. Further, that role itself is justified by the argument that there must be such principles of unity in order for infinitely divided bodies to be substances. Without the premise that some bodies are substances, the whole train of argument for simple substances just collapses. The doctrine of simple substances, then, cannot coherently be understood to exclude composite corporeal beings from the category of substance. To do so would be to undercut the actual rational basis for the doctrine itself and the point of the hypothesis of forms that led to the doctrine. (92)

In light of this conclusion, Levey proposes to revisit the status of the theory of monads. In his view, at least two of the steps outlined above, 7 and 8, are questionable moves for Leibniz to make (95). Yet if they are blocked, the case for the existence of simple substances falls apart.

2. Two Objections

As much as I admire the ingenuity of Levey's analysis, I remain unconvinced by his conclusions. I begin by offering two objections to his reconstruction of the principles of unity argument.

Levey takes the principles of unity argument to have the form of a *reductio*: it demonstrates that the Cartesian thesis that bodies are mere extension generates a contradiction when taken together with the premise that some bodies are substances. From this, according to Levey, Leibniz concludes that the Cartesian thesis must be rejected and that there must be something else in bodies in order to account for their unity as substances.

The first reason I have for demurring from Levey's reading is his claim that Leibniz rests his case on a *reductio* argument that takes for granted the premise that at least some bodies are substances. While it would be rash to claim that Leibniz never argues in this way, during the late 1670s and 1680s he more frequently frames his view conditionally or disjunctively: *if* bodies are substances, then there must be something in them besides extension; or: either bodies are mere phenomena *or* there must something in them besides extension. On this more modest formulation of his position, Leibniz has not staked out a commitment to the existence of corporeal substances as the basic furniture of the world; instead he is focused on understanding what would have to be the case for such substances to exist. This, I suggest, is the most plausible reading of the passage Levey cites from the draft of Leibniz's letter to Arnauld of late 1686. The relevant paragraph begins with Leibniz expressing his

lack of certainty concerning “substantial forms and the souls of bodies.” To settle the question, he continues, “one would have to be sure that bodies are substances and not merely true phenomena like the rainbow.” Then comes what Levey construes as the initial premise of Leibniz’s argument: “But with that supposed [that bodies are substances], I believe one can infer that corporeal substance does not consist of extension or divisibility” (GP II, 71-2/M 88).⁴ Given the context, I find it difficult to read this as anything more than a concession for the sake of examining the consequences that follow from it. This, I believe, becomes evident when we reach the argument’s actual conclusion, which Levey omits: “From this it follows that the substance of a body, if bodies have one, must be indivisible; whether it is called soul or form does not concern me” (GP II, 72/M 88). Nowhere in this passage do we find Leibniz asserting the existence of corporeal substance. His claim is that, *if* bodies are substances (or “have substance”), and not mere phenomena, then that substance must be accounted for in terms of an indivisible soul or form.⁵

A similar pattern of reasoning is observed in another text that Levey cites on behalf of his account. In the study which the Akademie editors title *An corpora sint mera phaenomena* and tentatively date to 1678-79, Leibniz, after rehearsing what he sees as the consequences of the Cartesian conception of body, concludes: “Hence it follows that either bodies are mere phenomena, and not real entities, or there is something other than extension in bodies.” (A VI.4, 1464/Ar 259). Levey glosses the text leading up to this conclusion as follows: “If the Cartesians were right, there would be no such thing as one body and thus no such thing as bodies at all; bodies would not be real beings but only phenomena, which is absurd. So... the Cartesian principle about the nature of body, is to be rejected” (74).

I think Levey moves too quickly here to a conclusion about the “absurdity” of the phenomenality of body. As I read Leibniz, this hypothesis remains on the table as one possible explanation of the appearances of material things, even if it is not the explanation that Leibniz favors. In a text contemporary with *An corpora*, he considers the Platonist notion that the whole of one’s life is a well-ordered dream, and rejects it on the basis of considerations of harmony, or divine wisdom (A VI.4, 1396-7/Ar 241). To Arnauld, in enumerating the various ways of accounting for the reality of bodies as aggregates, Leibniz explicitly includes the possibility that “no reality can be found in bodies,” that is, that they are mere phenomena (GP II, 96/M 120).

Examining the texts more closely, we find Leibniz entertaining two scenarios under which bodies might turn out to be “mere phenomena.” The more radical, for

which he finds precedent in the ancient skeptics and Descartes, is that perceptions as though of bodies might correspond to no external reality, for any of us might exist as a solitary perceiver. Until the end of his life, Leibniz acknowledges this as a metaphysical possibility, but one that can be rejected on the basis of considerations of divine wisdom. On the assumption that God has chosen to create the world of greatest harmony and perfection, we can be morally certain that we do not exist alone.⁶

A less radical scenario begins from the supposition of a multitude of perceivers, but construes bodies as “mere phenomena,” because their reality consists solely in their lawfulness and in the agreement among the perceptions of different minds. If the essence of matter were limited to extension alone, and there were no true unities in matter, then there would be nothing substantial in bodies and their reality would be that of coherent, shared dreams.⁷ There is even less reason in this case to think that Leibniz would regard such a phenomenalist account as “absurd.” He might in the end have reasons for rejecting it, but throughout his career it remains on the table as one possible explanation of the ontological status of matter.⁸

The preceding remarks suggest a second point on which I disagree with Levey. The realism to which Leibniz is most clearly committed is not one that takes for granted the existence of corporeal substance, but one that takes for granted that bodies are more than mere phenomena. In my view, this reflects the fundamental tendency of Leibniz’s thought, expressed in his conviction that there must be “true unities” in matter. Thus, while Levey takes the demand for “principles of unity” and “principles of reality” as supporting two separate lines of argument, one premised on the supposed substantiality of body, the other on its supposed reality (83-5), I see a much closer connection between the two claims: for bodies to be real, their existence must be explained in terms of principles of reality, which are necessarily principles of unity. Corporeal substance is a candidate for this explanatory role, but only if it is an *unum per se*, which it can be only if it is made one by an indivisible form.

We find Leibniz arguing in this way in his letter to Arnauld of 30 April 1687. Having defended the requirement that any aggregate or multitude must derive its reality from true unities, Leibniz concludes:

I do not say that there is nothing substantial or nothing except appearances in things devoid of true unity, for I grant that they always have as much reality or substantiality [*autant de réalité ou de substantialité*] as there is true unity in what goes into their composition. (GP II, 97/M 122)

He then directly links this to the postulation of corporeal substances:

You say you do not see what leads me to admit these substantial forms or rather these corporeal substances endowed with true unity; but it is because I cannot conceive of any reality without true unity. (GP II, 97/M 122)

Here Leibniz clearly advances the existence of corporeal substance as an explanation of the presumed reality of material things in general. While he may have other reasons for postulating their existence, in the correspondence with Arnauld this appears to be the primary reason.⁹

I want to emphasize, however, that the logic of Leibniz's argument does not entail that corporeal substances exist. The foundational thought is that if material things are real, then it must be possible to explain their existence in terms of the prior reality of substances. One way of doing this is to assert that some bodies are substances, corporeal substances. But that is not the only way, as Leibniz discovers—perhaps during his exchange with Fardella.¹⁰ Another way is to posit substantial unities “in” matter without supposing that those unities are the forms of bodies that are themselves substances. Why would Leibniz be tempted by this route? The answer, I believe, is that further analysis showed the corporeal substance doctrine to be less satisfying philosophically than he may initially have believed.

3. The Doctrine of Corporeal Substance

One of the things I find most puzzling about Levey's article is the free pass he seems to give to the notion of corporeal substance. He rightly pushes hard on the case Leibniz makes for the existence of simple substances—“assuming it is not just a metaphysical dogma but a view given on the basis of arguments” (63). Yet what I take from his article is that the existence of corporeal substance is just that for Leibniz: an undefended dogma on which his other metaphysical claims depend.¹¹

To think that the issue of ontological commitment is any less pressing in the case of corporeal substance than in the case of simple substance, or that there is any less reason to ask for the grounds of Leibniz's belief in the existence of corporeal substances, is to neglect a central feature his philosophical method, which distinguishes commonsense, unanalyzed beliefs about the world, and the truth as philosophy reveals it. There is no question but that we take ourselves to be unitary living bodies. This is a datum that Leibniz acknowledges throughout his career, even as he moves toward the theory of monads. On that theory, it is a fundamental fact about the perceptions of finite monads that they represent

themselves as embodied creatures, related to other bodies in space and time, and that at least as phenomena those bodies have the complex structure of organisms enveloped within organisms *ad infinitum*. Leibniz has important philosophical and theological reasons for holding on to these theses, and he believes he can affirm them even if his underlying ontology supports a view of reality that is at odds with a commonsense realism about bodies, organic or inorganic.

What is at issue is whether Leibniz regards the existence of corporeal substances as an ontological commitment that does not need to be supported through rigorous analysis and argumentation. He clearly rejects this in his later writings. Is there any evidence that he holds a different view during his so-called “middle period”? On my reading, his writings reveals considerable uncertainty about both the extension of the term ‘corporeal substance’—whether it applies to humans alone, or also animals and plants—and the nature of corporeal substance, on the assumption that such things exist. With respect to the latter, I believe, Leibniz’s views remain in flux throughout his career, gradually tending, on the basis of reasonable if not demonstrative grounds, toward the monadology.

Levey assumes that we can identify a canonical view of corporeal substance in writings from the 1680s and 1690s. This is the conception of corporeal substance as a *composite unity*, represented in Leibniz’s letter to Arnauld of 9 October 1687:

I reply that, assuming there is a soul or entelechy in animals or other bodily substances, one must argue from it on this point as we all argue from man who is a being endowed with a true unity conferred upon him by his soul, notwithstanding the fact that the mass of his body is divided into organs, vessels, humors, spirits, and that the parts are undoubtedly full of other corporeal substances endowed with their own substantial forms. (GP II, 120/M 153-4)

Two features of this account are essential to Levey’s interpretation. The first is that any corporeal substance is a composite entity: an infinitely enveloped mass of corporeal substances unified by a soul or substantial form. This point about the *structure* of a corporeal substance is crucial for generating what Levey describes as the “resolution” of corporeal substance into an inventory of forms alone. The second is that, as initially presented, the corporeal substance theory does not include a commitment to the existence of souls as substances in their own right. This is critical because on Levey’s account Leibniz’s *only* compelling argument for the existence of simple substances, of which the soul is an instance, takes as a premise the assertion of the existence of composite corporeal substances.

A survey of Leibniz's writings from the 1680s and 1690s suggests that neither of these assumptions about the nature of corporeal substance has the canonical status that Levey assumes for it. On the first point, we find evidence of a rival analysis that rejects the assumption that any corporeal substance must be a composite unity:

Corporeal substances have parts and species. The parts are matter and form. Matter is a principle of passion, or a primitive force of resisting, which is commonly called bulk or antitypy, from which flows the impenetrability of body. *Substantial form* is a principle of action, or a primitive force of acting. But in every substantial form there is a kind of cognition, that is, an expression or representation of external things in a certain individual thing, according to which the body is an *unum per se*, namely, in the substantial form itself. . . . This substantial form is necessarily found in every corporeal substance that is an *unum per se*. So if beasts are not mere machines, it is necessary for them to have substantial forms, and these are called *souls*. (*De mundo praesenti*, ca. 1684-6; A VI.4, 1507-8/Ar 285-87)

On this alternative account, any corporeal substance has two essential parts or aspects, matter and form; however, matter is conceived not as an aggregate of prior corporeal substances, but as a "primitive force of resisting," which is the ground of other physical properties of bodies. While there is no indication that this is Leibniz's preferred view of corporeal substance, and at least one text suggests that he may see it as consistent with the composite unity view (GP II, 120/M 153-4), the presence of this alternative account raises the question of how a rigorous metaphysical analysis should render the nature of a corporeal substance: is the matter essential to its nature a mass of other corporeal substances or just a primitive force of resisting? *Prima facie*, the latter option has attractions; however, if it were accepted, then the argument Levey advances, beginning from an assertion of the existence of composite corporeal substance, would need to be emended.

And what are we to make of that argument, if all along Leibniz recognizes the soul as a substance—and necessarily, given its immateriality, a simple substance? Again, there is evidence from the period of Leibniz affirming the position that the human soul and possibly other souls and forms qualify as substances in their own right:

We have said that everything that happens to the soul and to each substance follows from its notion, and therefore the very idea or essence of the soul carries with it the fact that all its appearances or perceptions must arise spontaneously from its own nature and precisely in such a way that they

correspond by themselves to what happens in the whole universe. (DM 33; A VI.4, 1582/AG 64)

As this passage indicates, Leibniz has good reasons for regarding the soul as a substance. It possesses the essential properties of *per se* unity, spontaneity and completeness that he takes to define a substantial nature.¹² If that is right, then Leibniz needs no additional argument to demonstrate that simple substances exist: if we have any knowledge of the existence of finite things, we know our own soul to exist, and we know that soul to be a substance. The only outstanding question is how many other souls there may be.

One might object that Leibniz still has need here of the principles of unity argument, for the only way we have of enumerating souls is as the unifying forms of living bodies. But this strikes me as a weak response. While it may be true that the only method we have of counting souls is by counting the bodies we take to be ensouled, this does not help to settle the question of whether ensouled bodies alone, ensouled bodies and souls, or souls alone qualify as true substances. The counting point will hold even if one believes that it is only a contingent fact that any soul or soul-like substance is accompanied by an organic body that marks its place in the physical world.

The recognition of souls, even if only human souls, as substances in their own right raises a significant problem for Levey's interpretation—one that allows us to begin to see the specific reasons that move Leibniz toward the monadology. In DM 33, in the text that immediately follows the passage just quoted, he writes:

But [the soul's perceptions] correspond more particularly and more perfectly to what happens in the body assigned to it, because the soul expresses the state of the universe in some way and for some time, according to the relation other bodies have to its own body. This also allows us to know how our body belongs to us, without, however, being attached to our essence. (A VI.4, 1582/AG 64-5)

Acknowledging the soul as a substance, which is the spontaneous source of all its own states, goes hand in hand with Leibniz's support for the hypothesis of preestablished harmony. With respect to the latter, he defends the view that the union of soul and body consists solely in the coordination of their respective actions. The weakness of this relation is apparent in the preceding passage from DM 33, where Leibniz asserts that although our body "belongs" to us, it "is not attached to our essence." The body is not attached to our essence, because the soul has all its states independently of the actions, or existence, of its body: "the soul alone makes

up its whole world and is sufficient unto itself with God...; hence, it is impossible that the changes in this extended mass called our body should do anything to the soul or that the dissolution of this body should destroy what is indivisible” (DM 32; A VI.4, 1581/AG 64).

It is surely correct to think that a number of independent lines of thought contribute to the development of Leibniz’s metaphysics and that some of these are in tension with others. One idea, which Levey unpacks, postulates that animated bodies are corporeal substances, possessing a *per se* unity, despite the compound nature of their bodies. My objection to Levey’s interpretation is not that he identifies this as an element of Leibniz’s thought, but that he does not see it as being challenged—and possibly overcome—by other metaphysical theses. One of these is the idea that the soul itself is an autonomous substance whose union with the body is fully accounted for by the hypothesis of preestablished harmony. While the Arnauld correspondence contains numerous passages that speak to the doctrine of corporeal substance, it also finds Leibniz advancing the doctrine of preestablished harmony, a view that stretches the relation of soul and body almost to its breaking point. This position is prominently represented in Leibniz’s final letter to Arnauld of 23 March 1690, in which he offers a summary of his “private thoughts”:

[T]here must be everywhere in the body indivisible substances, which cannot be engendered or corrupted, having something corresponding to souls. That all these substances have always been and will always be united to organic bodies capable of being transformed in various ways. That each of these substances contains in its nature the law by which the series of its operations continues, and all that has happened and will happen to it. That all its actions come from its own depths, except for dependence on God... That the union of soul and body, and even the operation of one substance upon another, consists only of that perfect harmony deliberately set up by the order of the first creation. (GP II, 135-6/M 170-1)

Given that Leibniz explicitly states that the “indivisible substances” in matter are united to organic bodies, we can only take those substances to be souls or soul-like entities. And it is reasonable to suppose further that the way in which the two are united is through the union he goes on to describe, a union that consists only of “perfect harmony.”

Harmony, in general, is not a relation that supports a designation of *per se* unity; if it were, the world as a whole would be a *per se* unity, or substance, which Leibniz strongly denies. On the face of it, then, Leibniz’s embrace of preestablished

harmony as his definitive explanation of the soul-body relation must inevitably push against his opinion that the soul and body together form a true composite unity, or corporeal substance. Furthermore, given the attractions of preestablished harmony, anchored in Leibniz's deepest understanding of the completeness and causal autonomy of substance, and his conviction that the soul itself is a substance, it would seem that only one outcome can be predicted: if Leibniz were concerned to reconcile his disparate metaphysical views, it would require jettisoning a theoretical commitment to composite, corporeal substance as a *per se* unity.

As I see it, this is exactly what happens, as Leibniz is gradually drawn to the theory of monads, but it is a development that does not occur quickly or uniformly. There are passages in the exchanges with Arnauld, Fardella, Bernoulli, De Volder and others that show Leibniz juggling, and sometimes fumbling, a heterogeneous set of commitments that cannot be fully reconciled. Still, amidst the confusion there are moments of clarity. One of these comes in his reply to Tournemine, where Leibniz publicly admits that preestablished harmony cannot account for the "true union" of soul and body, a union whereof the two are made an *unum per se* (GP VI, 595/AG 197). This admission does not immediately lead Leibniz to reject the idea that the human being is a true unity—he upholds it in his reply to Tournemine and in the *Theodicy*, while disparaging it to De Volder—but it does significantly alter the terms of the debate. He now distinguishes the bounds of philosophical reason, encompassed by necessary truths and our best attempts to account for the phenomena, from what we are required to believe as a prerequisite of religious faith. From 1706 onwards, a "true" or "real" union of soul and body, or of monads, is placed outside the bounds of reason, though it is not for that reason necessarily to be rejected. The upshot is that by this time Leibniz clearly inclines toward the theory of monads as our best *philosophical* understanding of reality. He arrives at this conclusion not merely by posing what Levey calls the "construction problem"—how to account for the existence of composite substance on the supposition that the ultimate constituents of reality are limited to monads—but by facing up to the competing demands of a variety of mutually incompatible metaphysical theses.¹³

4. Methodological Conclusion

Levey's paper is informed by the methodological principle that a metaphysical doctrine, if it is more than a mere dogma, should be taken to include the argument on which its assertion rests (93). Levey endeavors to make good on this principle

in the case of the theory of monads, and because he finds the arguments supporting that theory inadequate, he questions the rational basis of Leibniz's final metaphysics. I have suggested a different interpretation, which I believe renders more plausible the line of thought by which Leibniz is brought to embrace the theory of monads. In conclusion, however, I want to reflect more broadly on issues of methodology, as they inform Levey's article and Leibniz's own philosophy.

I earlier flagged a worry that Levey leans too heavily on claims about the development of Leibniz's philosophy, as if they were relevant to the justification of his views. Even if Leibniz had arrived at the doctrine of simple substance via reflections on the composition of corporeal substance, it would not necessarily mean that this was how we should understand the justification of that doctrine. By the same token, my alternative account of the development of Leibniz's views would fare no better. In metaphysics, as much as in natural science, the order of discovery and the order of justification must be distinguished.

Levey does not, of course, confound these orders in any simpleminded way. What he, in fact, reconstructs is a broadly deductive line of reasoning that he believes Leibniz relies on in advancing the claim that simple substances exist (86). In addition to criticizing certain features of this argument, I have urged a different reading of Leibniz's ontology ca. 1686—that it includes a commitment (so far as that can be defined) to the existence of both immaterial and corporeal substances—and, less explicitly, a different view of his philosophical methodology. Levey rightly stresses the importance of deductive arguments on behalf of the claim that simple substances exist. But his treatment of the general issue of ontological commitment is, in my view, too narrowly focused. It begins with an unsupported assertion of the existence of corporeal substance and has Leibniz arguing from there to the existence of simple substances.

I believe the issue of ontological commitment has to be handled in a more nuanced way, with greater attention paid to the methodological precepts that Leibniz himself enunciates. One of these is the distinction between what is commonly (*vulgo*) said and what is said in metaphysical rigor (*rigore metaphysice*).¹⁴ Only the latter serves as a standard of philosophical truth, yet Leibniz frequently acknowledges the usefulness and even necessity of ordinary ways of speaking. Consequently, for any assertion of existence, it must be asked: is it being expressed strictly, or merely for the sake of securing agreement?

With respect to philosophical theories themselves, Leibniz stresses the value of drawing from as many sources as possible: truth is not discovered through a single

source of inspiration, but by synthesizing the insights of different schools and traditions. At the same time, it is clear that some doctrines cannot be reconciled with others. They make contradictory claims about reality and only one can be defended as true in the strictest sense. In some cases, it is easy to discern Leibniz's own position: he rejects the existence of material atoms and defends the existence of indivisible, immaterial forms; he rejects real causal interaction and defends preestablished harmony; he rejects the conservation of quantity of motion and defends the conservation of *vis viva*. In other cases, it is less clear exactly which view Leibniz favors. Such cases include the operation of final causes, divine concurrence, and the existence of corporeal substance.

The last example raises in a particularly striking way the question of the justification of metaphysical theories. Leibniz places great emphasis on the role of deductive arguments in philosophy, whether as part of his grandiose plan for a demonstrative metaphysics or, more modestly, *a priori* arguments that are grounded in a small set of first principles. It would be a mistake, however, to think that Leibniz's repertoire of metaphysical arguments is limited to deductive proofs. Particularly when dealing with issues of ontological commitment, he is apt to refer to justificatory criteria that resemble those operative in the natural sciences. While deductive arguments are relevant to determining the consistency, or internal coherence, of a theory, if we are forced to choose between two global theories a broader set of considerations comes into play. The truth of a theory is assessed by weighing it against its competitors along a variety of axes: cogency of its first principles; comprehensiveness; simplicity; adequacy to the phenomena (which may include widely held beliefs such as that concerning the reality of bodies). The weight given to these criteria will vary from case to case. Often, Leibniz believes, rival theories can be eliminated by showing the unsatisfactory character of their first principles. But it is not always as straightforward as this. Beyond the fact that the criteria themselves may come into conflict, there is the further complication that the dialectical context in which Leibniz finds himself involves considerations not only of philosophical truth but also of theological orthodoxy. Thus, declaring oneself on a vexed question involves not only weighing a complex set of epistemic criteria but also negotiating those criteria in relation to pronouncements of faith and judgments of prudence about what should and should not be said publicly.

All of these factors are relevant in coming to a judgment about Leibniz's final ontology. The evidence of the texts, and the structure of the problem itself, support the conclusion that Leibniz did not see the choice between the "hypothesis of

REPLY TO SAMUEL LEVEY

mere monads” and the “common hypothesis concerning corporeal or composite substances” as an issue that could be settled by demonstrative argument.¹⁵ Leibniz’s core beliefs concerning the nature of substance arguably could be satisfied by both theories. Consequently, both theories were in principle ways that reality could be. Deciding between them thus becomes a more subtle matter of assessing the respective epistemic merits of the two theories and the degree to which the claims of philosophical reason must answer to those of religious orthodoxy. In my view, we can be fairly confident as to how Leibniz resolves these questions in his late writings. While he may resolve them differently (or leave them unresolved) in earlier periods, his reasons for preferring one ontology over another should be seen as involving a wider set of considerations, centered on the notion of explanatory adequacy, than Levey’s interpretation allows.

Donald Rutherford
Department of Philosophy, 0119
University of California, San Diego
9500 Gilman Drive
La Jolla, CA 92093-0119
drutherford@ucsd.edu

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Notes

¹ Levey 2007. All parenthetical page references are to this article. I use "theory of monads" to refer to the doctrine according to which the only genuine substances are soul-like monads. Levey refers to this doctrine as Leibniz's "monadology" (61) and as "substance idealism" (63). For the latter usage, see Rutherford 2008.

² For versions of this argument, see Adams 1994; Rutherford 1995; and the editors' Introduction to Leibniz 2007.

³ See, e.g., Leibniz's letter to Arnauld of 30 April 1687 (GP II, 96-7/M 120-1); and Rutherford 1990: 527-33.

⁴ I have modified Mason's translation ("But once that is granted...") to conform better to the original French: "*Mais cela posé....*"

⁵ For a related, and more detailed, critique of Levey's formulation of this argument, see Tyler Doggett, "Why Leibniz Thinks Descartes Was Wrong and the Scholastics Were Right" (unpublished).

⁶ See, from early in his career, his letter to Foucher, ca. 1676 (GP I, 372-3); from late in his career, letters to Des Bosses of 11 March 1706 (GP II, 307/LR 37); 29 April 1715 (GP II, 496/LR 339); 19 August 1715 (GP II, 502/LR 347); 29 May 1716 (GP II, 526/LR 369).

⁷ In his letter to Arnauld of 30 April 1687, Leibniz writes: "You object, Sir, that it may be of the essence of matter to be devoid of true unity; but it will then be of the essence of matter to be a phenomenon, lacking all reality as would a coherent dream, for phenomena themselves like the rainbow or a heap of stones would be wholly imaginary if they were not composed of entities possessing true unity" (GP II, 97/M 122). The thrust of Leibniz's remark, I take it, is not that this would be absurd, but that it is a conclusion Arnauld would reject. In later writings, Leibniz employs two notions of "well-founded phenomena." Either they are phenomena

whose existence is grounded in the reality of substance (GP II, 306/LR 35; GP VII 564), or they are phenomena whose coherence and lawfulness allow them to be distinguished from dreams and illusions (GP II, 435-6/LR 227; GP VII, 468). The latter qualify as “mere phenomena” in the terms of the Arnauld correspondence; the former include any aggregate “composed of entities possessing true unity.”

⁸ To Foucher he writes in 1687: “If bodies were only simple machines, and there was only extension or matter in bodies, it is demonstrable that all bodies would be only phenomena: this is what Plato recognized clearly, in my view.” Leibniz concludes the paragraph with this: “But these sorts of considerations are not suited to the views of everyone, and ordinary people could understand nothing of them before having their minds prepared” (GP I, 391-2). A similar passage appears in his 1702 letter to Queen Sophie Charlotte (GP VI, 494/AG 189). The De Volder and Des Bosses correspondences contain several well-known passages that support a phenomenalist account of body.

⁹ Leibniz concludes his long letter to Arnauld of 9 October 1687 with the following: “[T]hose who will not want to acknowledge that souls exist in animals, and substantial forms elsewhere, will nonetheless be able to approve of the way in which I explain the union [*l’union*] of mind and body, and all I say about true substance; reserving their right to preserve in any way they can, without such forms or anything possessing true unity, either by points or by atoms, if they think best, the reality of matter and corporeal substances, and even to leave that open; for one can limit one’s researches where one considers it appropriate” (GP II, 127/M 162-3). See also GP II, 119/M 152-3. Leibniz’s concern to account for the reality of material things is consistent with the claim, defended recently by Garber, that “the question of the ultimate makeup of corporeal substance may just not be of interest to him at this moment” (2004: 138). As I go on to argue, the question is there to be asked, but Leibniz may not have asked it, or felt the need to ask it (consistent with his statement above to Arnauld). For further discussion, see Lodge 2005.

¹⁰ I advance this reading of the Fardella texts in Rutherford 2008. See also Levey, pp. 80-1.

¹¹ Revisiting the entry point of his analysis, Levey writes: “Motion in a plenum requires the actually infinite division of bodies. This infinite division poses a threat to the idea that bodies could be substances, a threat which is then answered by introducing incorporeal forms as principles of unity for corporeal substances” (85). Nowhere, however, do we find a case made for the existence of corporeal substances themselves.

¹² For an elaboration of this point, see Sleigh 1990: 104-10; Adams 1994: 268. Although Sleigh concedes that there is no explicit support in the Arnauld correspondence for the claim that souls possess a true unity, he himself cites the following passage from the unpublished draft of the letter of 30 April 1687: “I admit that I cannot demonstrate absolutely that there are substances with a true unity other than spirits. It is possible that bodies are only regulated phenomena” (1990: 106). Leibniz never wavers in his conviction that spirits or minds are substances, and that the mind is an “intelligent soul” (DM 34).

¹³ For a fuller development of this reading, see the editors’ Introduction to Leibniz 2007: xlv-lvii.

¹⁴ For examples of this distinction, see A VI.4, 1647/AG 33; GP VI, 494/AG 189; GP II, 250/AG 175–6; GP VI, 585/AG 262.

¹⁵ For this framing of the issue, see Leibniz’s letter to Des Bosses of 24 January 1713 (GP II, 473-4/LR 295-7).