

# Confused Perception and Corporeal Substance in Leibniz<sup>1</sup>

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## Abstract

I argue against the view that Leibniz's construction of reality out of perceiving substances must be seen as the first of the modern idealist philosophies. I locate this central feature of Leibniz's thought instead in a decidedly premodern tradition. This tradition sees bodiliness as a consequence of the confused perception of finite substances, and equates God's uniquely disembodied being with his maximally distinct perceptions. But unlike modern idealism, the premodern view takes confusion as the very feature of any created substance that makes possible its distinctness from the Creator. Modern idealism, in contrast, emerges when the external world becomes a *problem*, when the epistemological worry arises as to how the mind might access it. In the tradition in which I place Leibniz, there simply is no such worry.

It will be recalled that for the mature Leibniz there is nothing in the world but simple substances, and in them perception and appetite. Perception is the representation within the monad of the order of coexistence of monads; appetite is the tendency to move from one representation of the order of coexistence to another. With these basic definitions in stock, we might in turn define 'confusion' as the characteristic of monads whereby they represent to themselves the order of coexistence of simple substances as an order of coexistence of corporeal substances. We might, further, define 'dazedness' as the tendency of monads to move from one representation of the order of coexistence of simple substances as corporeal substances to another such representation. Note that the definitions of 'confusion' and 'dazedness' are posterior to, and build upon, Leibniz's basic definitions of 'perception' and 'appetite' respectively. All perception of created substances is confused perception; all of their appetite occurs in a daze. I will be referring in what follows to the 'Confusion Theory of Body', for the sake of succinctness, though the full story of a created substance's plight in the world involves not just its confused perception of the order of coexistence, but also its dazed succession from one confused perception to the next.

There is of course nothing new about the observation that Leibniz's mature account of body is rooted in confused perception. What I would like to argue in this paper is not just that the world of bodies, for Leibniz, can be exhaustively accounted for in terms of confusion and dazedness, but, at the same time, that this

ultimate account of bodies in terms of perception has nothing at all to do with what we think of as modern idealism.

It may be that in making this argument I am flogging a horse whose prospects for recovery are looking increasingly grim. It has been quite a while since I've heard the term 'idealism' in connection with Leibniz at all; the preferred term for Leibniz's well known reduction of bodies to well-founded phenomena has been, appropriately enough, 'phenomenalism'. Nonetheless, the association has been made between Leibniz and idealism, notably by Robert Adams in his tellingly titled *Leibniz: Determinist, Theist, Idealist*. For Adams, "[a] construction of the whole of reality out of perceiving substances and their perceptions and appetites exemplifies a broadly idealist approach to metaphysics. Leibniz was the first of the great modern philosophers to develop an idealist metaphysics."<sup>2</sup> This is the view of Leibniz I would like to dispute, arguing instead that Leibniz's construction of the whole of reality out of perceiving substances makes him not the first of a certain school of modern philosophers, but indeed the successor to a distinctly premodern tradition.

### I. The Problem of Corporeal Substance

In arguing for Leibniz's rootedness in a premodern tradition I have yet to describe, it is my particular aim to help to put to rest the now teenaged debate concerning the role of corporeal substances in Leibniz's thought. What, the question has raged, could *corporeal* substances be doing in the philosophy of an idealist? *Corpora* are bodies, while bodies, idealists think, are (*whatever* they are), certainly less than substantial. 'Corporeal substance', then, has appeared to many to be a contradiction in terms, and the characteristically non-self-contradicting Leibniz's habit of sticking these two terms together has presented at least an apparent mystery.

Dan Garber's influential 1986 article, "Leibniz and the Foundations of Physics: The Middle Years" opened up a veritable floodgate for the study of the controversial status of corporeal substance in Leibniz.<sup>3</sup> Garber effectively made it possible to speak about something in Leibniz that really looks in retrospect as though it should have been a part of the conversation all along, namely, that Leibniz frequently, unabashedly talks as though there really are such things as corporeal substances. For all of the possibilities it opened up, Garber's discovery was, to be fair, like some imagined discovery of allusions to Greek mythology in Joyce's *Ulysses*: the thing discovered was already all over the place, in plain view, for all to see.

Leibniz is most strongly inclined to affirm the existence of corporeal substance

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in his middle years, and all of these affirmations flatly contradict many other passages from this and other periods, not just those such as the famous positive ontological claim of the *Monadology* period that there is nothing in the world but simple substances, but also a number of negative epistemological claims to the effect that we could never really know of the existence of corporeal substances. To cite an early example, in the short piece “*Distinctio mentis et corporis*” of 1677/78, Leibniz declares flatly, “In no way can it be proven by natural reason that there are divisible or corporeal substances.”<sup>4</sup> Yet in the *Definitiones cogitationesque metaphysicae* of roughly the same time, or shortly thereafter (dated by Richard Arthur to the period between Summer 1678 and Winter 1681), Leibniz offers the following unequivocal definitions: “*Body* is a substance that can act and be acted upon. *Matter* is the principle of passion, i.e., of being acted upon; *Form* is the principle of action.”<sup>5</sup> In a number of pieces in this period, such as the *De modo distinguendi phaenomena realia ab imaginariis* 1683/85, Leibniz’s general strategy seems to be to reaffirm the statement of 1677/78, but then to go on and describe what corporeal substance *must* be like, *if in fact* there is such a thing. This tack, it is worth noting, is similar to that he later takes concerning the *vinculum substantiale* in the Des Bosses correspondence: *if* there must be such a thing as a real union between body and soul, here is how it would have to work.

Commentators have taken up a variety of positions, exhaustively taxonomized by Glenn Hartz,<sup>6</sup> on the related questions of whether Leibniz ever admitted the reality of composite substances, and, if he did, how this position jibes with his famous insistence that there is in the world nothing but simple substances. I think and hope that by now no one who has so much as thumbed through a collection of Leibniz’s philosophical writings would give an unequivocal ‘No’ to the former question. The more difficult problem for commentators has been to account for the place of corporeal substances in what has ordinarily been thought to be a strictly simplist ontology. In Hartz’s taxonomy, there are compatibilists and incompatibilists, and a variety of compromise positions in between. Hartz himself is an incompatibilist, but believes it speaks well of Leibniz’s thought as a whole that there are features of it that cannot be made to fit with one another. Around the same time that Garber published his article on Leibniz’s middle-period hylomorphic realism, André Robinet presented a theory of Leibniz’s metaphysics that took the commitment to corporeal substances fully into account, but audaciously and erroneously described this aspect of Leibniz’s thought as forming a disjunctive architectonic with the simple-substance

metaphysics, resolved transcendentally.<sup>7</sup> Other scholars have weighed in with their own versions of compatibilism, though none of which have gone to such interpretive extremes as Robinet's work. Other scholars still have adopted the wise strategy of avoiding the topic. The challenge in toeing a compatibilist line, as I will, is to make Leibniz come out looking like he knew what he was doing in talking now about simple, now about corporeal, substances, without slipping from interpretation into mere wishful thinking.

A brief comment is warranted on the tentative nature of this compatibilist project. I myself have grown increasingly worried in the course of thinking about the issue of corporeal substance that arguing for compatibilism or against it is not what we should be doing at all, and this for the following reason. Garber argues convincingly that, during Leibniz's middle period, the demand that substances be simple just hasn't become a pressing one for Leibniz; in this period, Leibniz insists only that substance be *individual*, a criterion a good deal easier for a composite substance to fulfill than the one Leibniz would later adopt. Thus, for him, the basic concerns of the middle and later periods of Leibniz's career are fundamentally different. This view has not gone undisputed. Notably, Glenn Hartz has argued that corporeal substances play an important role in Leibniz's philosophy until the very end of his career.<sup>8</sup> One might also point out, in the other direction, that the definition of substance in terms of perception and appetite characteristic of the simplest ontology of the *Monadology* is not entirely absent from earlier writings. For instance, in the *Conspectus libelli elementorum physicae* of 1678/9, we read "[t]hat it is the nature of a soul or form to have some perceptions and appetite, which are the passions and actions of the soul."<sup>9</sup> At present I am most persuaded by Garber's account of the shifts in Leibniz's basic ontological concerns throughout his career, and I can't but acknowledge that if this account is correct, then there is little point in taking a stance as a compatibilist or an incompatibilist at all. For now, I would like to characterize my compatibilist argument as one that is merely, as it were, in reserve, ready to be deployed in the unlikely event that Garber's developmental account proves wrong.

This variety of compatibilism, when deployed, would be one that concedes that for Leibniz simple substances and their perceptions are all there really is, but that insists that the essential confusion of the perceptions of created substances is precisely what makes them bodily, and that this account of body is one that we see in Leibniz throughout both the middle and late periods. In other words, because we can be assured that the perceptions of all non-God monads are confused perceptions, we may justly claim that corporeality is an essential feature of these

monads, indeed, *the* essential feature, without which they could not be said to be distinct from the Creator at all. There is no contradiction between saying that there are corporeal substances and saying that there are only simple substances, so long as we understand corporeality as resulting from the confused perceptions of these simple substances. To say that a simple substance is perceiving confusedly is not to say that it is somehow mistaken; rather, it is perceiving in a manner appropriate to its status as a corporeal, i.e., created, substance.

This view, as we will see, is firmly rooted in what may roughly, and not unproblematically, be called the Christian Platonic tradition. In what follows, after briefly considering Plotinus' metaphysics of body, I will look at one of the prominent exponents of the Confusion Theory in the Christian Platonic tradition, namely, Nicholas of Cusa, a 15<sup>th</sup>-century German mystical thinker and mathematician. I will then go on and look at the passages in which the same theory finds expression in Leibniz. Then, in the final section, I will discuss how these passages have been received by recent commentators, and also how we might, as it were, improve their reception.

## II. Christian Platonism

Enrico Pasini has claimed<sup>10</sup> that only a very superficial reader of Leibniz, including a number of German scholars of a century or so ago, and, by implication, myself, could mistake what Leibniz was trying to do with his perceptually based theory of body for a sort of neo-Cusanianism. Certainly, there is a strain of *fin-de-siècle* and early 20<sup>th</sup>-century work on Leibniz in Germany that is perhaps over-intent on discovering common threads extending throughout the whole history of German philosophy, and that anachronistically identifies both Nicholas of Cusa and Leibniz as culturally or *geistesgeschichtlich*, rather than just geographically, German. The best evidence, indeed, suggests that Leibniz never read Nicholas at all, and may have learned about him only through the mediation of the 16<sup>th</sup>-century Italian Hermeticist Giordano Bruno. Stuart Brown also cites the Herborn Encyclopedists as potentially influential in this connection.<sup>11</sup>

It is not my aim here, in any case, to establish a direct link. What has come to be thought of, after Christia Mercer, as the Platonist side of Leibniz's thought was a set of very common doctrines shared, in part but seldom *in toto*, by a number of different thinkers. If I may suggest an analogy to the theory of evolution, I would like to say that if Leibniz and earlier Platonists such as Nicholas do not share certain traits by descent, then they do by convergence, just as fish and whales

both have fins, while differing greatly in other respects, because they are faced with the same environmental conditions, and not because they share a common ancestor. The environmental condition I have in mind that would explain the shared traits is Christianized Platonism, which is not so much a tradition actively and knowingly communicated by its initiates from one generation to another (for this would be similarity by descent), but rather serves as a sort of reserve of basic assumptions seemingly too natural to be thought of by those who assume them as ‘positions’ or ‘stances’. Of course if you do not believe, with Mercer, that Platonism was part of the environmental background of the 1660s in Leibniz’s Leipzig, then even convergent evolution will be implausible.<sup>12</sup> I’ll leave the argument in favor of Leibniz’s early rootedness in Platonism to Mercer, while registering *en passant* that I’m convinced by it.

There are clearly broader and narrower senses in which the term may be applied to a thinker or a school of thought. I am interested in a few features identified by Mercer that seem to me fairly clearly to be the common ground of Nicholas Cusa and Leibniz. Specifically, I have in mind three Christian Platonic principles, conveniently named and summarized by Mercer in her account of Leibniz’s early development. (There are several other Platonic assumptions identified by Mercer that I will be leaving out of my discussion.) These are, in a slightly shortened form, and taken out of the order in which she presents them:

- (i) *The Theory of Reflective Harmony*: There is an interrelation among minds such that each mind thinks or reflects all the others in such a way that each mind may be said to contain all the others.
- (ii) *The Doctrine of the Hierarchy of Being*: Matter, which is the lowest stratum of the hierarchy, lacks all power and causal efficacy.
- (iii) *The Creaturely Inferiority Complex*: Every product of the Supreme Being contains all the attributes that constitute the divine essence, though the product instantiates each of those attributes in a manner inferior to the way in which they exist in the Supreme Being.

What I would like to do is add the Confusion Theory of Body as a fourth Platonic principle, additional to those offered by Mercer and cited here, and claim that with all of these together we can go a great distance toward understanding both Leibniz’s mature metaphysics of corporeal substance, and its pedigree.

In Plotinus, what we have been describing as ‘confusion’ is accounted for as a falling away from the One and into *number*. If a soul falls too far, it drifts into

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multiplicity (πλῆθος), and itself becomes multiplicity, “since there is nothing to unite one part of it to another.” But, Plotinus continues, if something, in falling away from the One, nonetheless “abides in its outpouring,” then it is not multiplicity but rather magnitude (μέγεθος). Things “lose themselves” insofar as they depend on magnitude, and “possess themselves” insofar as they possess oneness, and can find themselves simultaneously lost and self-possessed, in varying degrees.<sup>13</sup> Plotinus insists that all reasoned knowledge (λόγος) contributes to dispossession, since “reasoned knowledge is a rational process (ἐπιστήμη), and a rational process is many.”<sup>14</sup>

While it is very difficult to translate Plotinus’ two key terms here, *logos* and *episteme*, it seems clear enough that he intends to say that every cognitive act of an individual soul contributes to the dissolving multiplicity of the soul, simply in virtue of the fact that the cognitive act must contain, at the very least, two distinct terms. Updating this insight a bit, we may say that Plotinus believes that every thought requires that the thinker sink to something less than absolute unity, since the thinker must be thinking a subject and attaching a predicate to it, a predicate that in its being attached is not being thought as identical to or one with its subject. This is the case whether something is thinking itself or thinking something else. This point is of particular interest in the case where a soul thinks itself: on Plotinus’ view, nothing can think of itself without rendering itself composite, and thus non-simple. It is for this reason that Plotinus rejects absolutely the Aristotelian view that the divine eternally thinks itself; Plotinus insists instead that the divine must think absolutely nothing if it is to remain simple and thus warrant being called divine at all.<sup>15</sup>

All thinking, whether it involves perception or higher forms of cognition, results in a certain amount of dissolution of the thinker. To the extent that the thinker dissolves altogether, multiplicity results. But in less severe cases—in, we might say, the smooth course of things at the level of souls—what results is magnitude. To put this another way, the rational thought of souls cannot but filter things, themselves included, through magnitude. But this magnitude is in itself nothing but a by-product, as it were, of the way in which unities subordinate to the ultimate unity, the One, cognize the world.

Recall the first of Mercer’s Platonic principles cited above, the Theory of Reflective Harmony, which holds that there is an interrelation among minds such that each mind thinks or reflects all the others in such a way that each mind may be said to contain all the others. As a motif of Renaissance thought, this principle takes the form of a succinct slogan: *omnia in omnibus*. This motif plays a

particularly important role in the philosophy of Nicholas of Cusa as well. Significantly, Nicholas believes that he can explain by appeal to his notions of enfoldedness and unfoldedness how it is possible for a corporeal substance to be at once simple and composite. As he describes it, the body is an unfolding of the soul.<sup>16</sup> The term Nicholas uses for unfolding is ‘*explicatio*’, which contains the root of the Latin word for ‘fold’, ‘*plica*’. Let us note briefly that the concept of fold would later become important for Leibniz’s analysis of the composition of the continuum, particularly in the *Pacidius Philalethi*, recently translated by Richard Arthur and dated to October–November, 1676.<sup>17</sup> The image of enfolding also figures prominently in Leibniz’s enthusiastic musings about the significance of Swammerdam’s discovery of insect metamorphosis, which Leibniz sees as lending support to his view that no substance is ever naturally created or destroyed.<sup>18</sup>

Nicholas is particularly concerned to show how it is that ‘alterities’ can unfold from individuals that are, in themselves, one and simple, how, that is, a simple soul can nonetheless have multiple predicates simultaneously true of it. Nicholas uses the example of Socrates, explaining why it is that, when Socrates is thought, his bodily members must be thought along with him, even though none of these is itself Socrates, since of course Socrates is, strictly speaking, one and simple. I quote at some length:

In the Socratic being, there is no otherness or difference. For the being of Socrates is the individual oneness of whatever is present in Socrates, so that the being of all that is in Socrates is enfolded in this one being – i.e., the individual simplicity, wherein there is nothing other or different.

Nicholas goes on to offer an account of non-identity within the simple substance itself, an account, namely, of how the simple substance may, indeed must, at the same time involve differentiation or parting out into organs:

in this most simple being the eye is not the ear, the head is not the feet, because the head is not most simple Socratic being. Hence, the head’s being does not encompass the whole of Socratic being. And in this manner I see, by Your illumination, O Lord, that because simple Socratic being is altogether incommunicable to, and uncontractible to, the being of any member, the being of one member is not the being of the other. But the simple Socratic being is the being of all the members of Socrates; in it the complete variety-of-being-and otherness-of-being that happens to the members is a simple oneness—even as in the form of a whole the plurality of the forms of the *parts* is a oneness.<sup>19</sup>

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Nicholas pursues this point further in *De docta ignorantia*. He maintains that all of the parts of the body, contributing organically to the unity of the whole, are in a sense identical with all of the other parts, since each part is, in the same way, immediately in the whole man, and thus each part is enfolded in each of the other parts. For Nicholas, as for Plotinus, a simple unity can endure even when it is unfolded in its organs, or, in Plotinus' language, when it falls into magnitude. Indeed, unfolding or falling in this way is business as usual for created substances. For Nicholas moreover, members only count as members of the same composite thing because they mutually represent one another as sharing this membership.

For Nicholas, as for Leibniz, the individual in fact represents to itself the whole universe in the same way it represents its own body, but the body is an ontologically relevant unit of analysis because of the intimacy with which the parts are combined. Dietrich Mahnke, one of those old-school German scholars mentioned above, all too ready to round up German thinkers from various centuries and portray them all as moments in the continuous unfolding of *Geist*, thus says of Nicholas (by way of explicating Leibniz): "The individual spirit [for Nicholas] is a living mirror of the universe and makes it possible to unfold the knowledge of all things from oneself, without requiring that anything from outside enter."<sup>20</sup>

Nicholas is also committed to a version of Mercer's third Platonic assumption, The Creaturely Inferiority Complex, which holds that every product of the Supreme Being contains all the attributes that constitute the divine essence, though the product instantiates each of those attributes in a manner inferior to the way in which they exist in the Supreme Being. In his account of his own commitment to the Creaturely Inferiority Complex, we may also discern a commitment to what I have identified as the Confusion Theory of Body. For him, the intellect is, in itself, "free from all organs,"<sup>21</sup> even though it has no other way to perceive the world, except as bodily, under the aspect of alterity [*alteritas*]. Unicity and alterity or, to give the latter term a slightly less Levinasian flavor, otherness, are for Nicholas only opposite points of a continuum, between which all perceiving beings move. Showing his commitment to the Platonic Doctrine of the Hierarchy of Being, Nicholas describes spirit as that which "contains everything," and does so in one of four hierarchicalized ways:

- (i) Divinely, insofar as something is the truth;
- (ii) intellectually, insofar as something is not the truth itself, but is true;
- (iii) in accordance with soul [animaliter], insofar as something is an image of truth [ut res est verisimiliter];
- (iv) corporeally [corporaliter], *insofar as something leaves behind similarity*

*to that which is true and enters into confusion.*"<sup>22</sup>

For Nicholas, only God, because of his unity, is capable of cognition of the first kind identified in the hierarchy. As Nicholas writes, "Only in the divine intellect, through which every being has its being, is the truth of all things attained, in other intellects it is only attained otherwise and modified [aliter atque varie]." <sup>23</sup> Created substances perceive their own activities and those of others as physically diffused or 'explicated', even though these activities are at the same time complicated, i.e., enfolded, in the soul.<sup>24</sup> The contrast between unfoldedness and enfoldedness, is precisely that between bodiliness and spirituality. God, being purely spiritual, may thus be understood as that entity that does not have to apprehend the "truth of all things" through their unfolding, does not, for example, need to proceed through the mediation of a creature's bodily unfoldedness in order to apprehend the truth about that creature.

Let us recall here again Mercer's third Platonic assumption, the Creaturely Inferiority Complex, that every product of the Supreme Being contains all the attributes that constitute the divine essence, though the product instantiates each of those attributes in a manner inferior to the way in which they exist in the Supreme Being. For Nicholas, we see, this assumption holds for the inferiority of a creature's capacity for perception to that of God. God perceives perfectly; creatures perceive things in an inferior manner, or confusedly, as body.

We have, hopefully, at least surveyed enough of the basic features of earlier Christian Platonism, as represented by Nicholas of Cusa, to be prepared now to look at how these features manifest themselves in Leibniz's own thought. But first a few more words are perhaps in order on the brimming controversy over Leibniz's debt to the Platonic tradition.

For those who may remain skeptical of Leibniz's Platonic roots, it is important to acknowledge that many elements of Leibniz's theory of corporeal substance are rooted in convictions, shared by Nicholas of Cusa, that one would be hard-pressed to identify as either distinctly Platonic or distinctly Aristotelian. Nicholas of Cusa, like Plotinus before him and Leibniz after him, offers us a curious recipe of Plato and Aristotle, and plenty of spices entirely his own. In *De docta ignorantia*, Nicholas' metaphysics appears to derive from a combination of Aristotle's *Categories*, Plotinus, as well as some features of Pythagorean numerology. What Nicholas calls the 'second oneness', the oneness of the universe as opposed to the oneness of God, is tenfold, since, as Aristotle taught, there are ten categories of being. But where does Nicholas think Aristotle's knowledge of the tenfoldness of being comes from? Kant would later chastise Aristotle for being arbitrary in

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coming up with ten ways in which ‘being’ is said rather than, say, his own rigorously and exhaustively deduced twelve; Nicholas, quite the opposite, thinks that the ten were chosen under the influence of nothing less arbitrary than the Pythagorean tetragrammaton: “Now, all things are enfolded in the number ten,” Nicholas writes, “Therefore the tenfold oneness of the universe enfolds the plurality of all contracted things.”<sup>25</sup>

Mercer rightly sees Leibniz’s early development as drawing on both Platonic and Aristotelian sources, and also, rightly, offers an ‘environmental’ account of Leibniz’s lifelong silence about the importance of the Platonic elements in his background: there’s no need to go out of one’s way to mention a feature of one’s background that is so deeply rooted it can simply be taken for granted. Platonism was mother’s milk for Leibniz. Thus, Mercer responds to the question why Leibniz did not announce his commitment to Platonism in the same way that he so enthusiastically told his teacher Thomasius that he was rehabilitating Aristotelian substantial forms, as follows:

Leibniz was not motivated to justify his Platonism because that philosophy had not become the object of ridicule. On the contrary, the vast majority of Leibniz’s contemporaries were themselves inclined to turn to the Platonist tradition, both pagan and Christian, for inspiration concerning divine topics. In other words, Leibniz stands in a long line of Christian philosophers who found Platonist thought much more amenable than the thought of other ancient authors to Christian assumptions about divinity.<sup>26</sup>

Some might argue, though, that, while it is relatively easy to isolate features of a historical figure’s thought, call these features ‘doctrines’ and give them names, it is somewhat harder to find any adequate reason to see these features as genealogically rooted in an earlier historical figure, particularly an ancient one, whose thought has undergone so many transformations and distortions over the millennia as to make it difficult to maintain that there are, as in the present case, Platonists at all beyond the earliest years of the Academy. To drive this point home, we need only remember that Plotinus’ *Enneads*, in many respects the central documents of what came to be thought of as neoplatonism, were for centuries misidentified as the missing “theology” of Aristotle, and indeed there are plenty of Aristotelian elements in there, and Stoic ones too. Even in the ancient world, Platonism was already a mixed bag.

In light of all this, some will argue that Platonism is just far too amorphous and vitiated a set of commitments by the early modern period, and too far astray of what Plato actually said, to make it a useful category of analysis for the historian

of philosophy. They are right in a sense: early modern Platonism is not Plato transposed into the early modern period. But so what? The principles Mercer has isolated really do help us to gain insight into what Leibniz thought; and, moreover, these principles do have a history that extends back to the Renaissance, and which has, rightly or wrongly, been associated with the name of Plato.

### III. Leibniz on Confusion and Body

The connection between confusion and corporeality in Leibniz comes out most vividly in passages from his middle years, roughly 1683 to 1695, the period to which commentators have been most willing to attribute at least a hylomorphic leaning. Let us look at a couple of these passages. A full study of the connection I am sketching would, of course, be much longer, and here I can only hope to offer the beginnings of a picture of what such a study would look like.

As early as 1676, we see Leibniz actively associating the Confusion Theory of Body with Mercer's Theory of Reflective Harmony. In the *De plenitudine mundi*, dated by Richard Arthur to March, 1676, we read: "It seems to me that every mind is omniscient, confusedly; and that any mind perceives simultaneously whatever happens in the whole world; and that these perceptions, of infinite varieties fused together at the same time, give rise to those sensations we have of colors, tastes, touches."<sup>27</sup> A common theme of Leibniz's discussion of confused perception throughout the 1680s is that we always perceive the activity of our bodies, and it is precisely in virtue of this perception that they may be said to be *our* bodies at all. Thus, in a short text dated by the Akademie-Ausgabe editors to the period Summer, 1683-Winter, 1685/6): "From all the motions that take place in it, we always perceive our body, that is, a confused something, just as we hear the sound of the sea, although we do not distinguish the actions of the individual waves."<sup>28</sup> As Leibniz also emphasizes throughout the 1680s, however, this perception is not really limited to the body, but indeed extends to the whole universe. The way in which the parts of the body conspire with one another may be emphasized more frequently, since it is rooted in the Hippocratic medical tradition and certainly seems less audacious than the theory of reflective harmony extended to the whole universe. But, as for Nicholas, the body and the universe outside of it differ in relation to the embodied substance only by degree of clarity with which they are perceived.

In the *Specimen inventorum de admirandis naturae generalis arcanis*, dated by Arthur to around 1686, confusion is presented as following directly from the theory

of reflective harmony:

[E]ach substance expresses the whole universe according to its own situation and point of view, inasmuch as everything else is related to it. Hence it is necessary that some of our perceptions, even though clear, are nonetheless confused, since they involve infinitely many things—for instance, our perceptions of color, heat, and the like. In fact, the manifold finite substances are nothing but different expressions of the same universe according to the different respects and limitations proper to each one... Thus what Hippocrates said of the human body is true of the universe itself, that all things harmonize and are in sympathy.<sup>29</sup>

A body belongs to the substance to which it belongs because of the relatively greater distinctness with which the substance expresses this body to itself, in comparison to its expression of the rest of the universe. What the body itself is, as Leibniz very clearly says in this passage, is a particularly distinct expression. The body is *not* a particularly distinctly expressed *something* (though this is the language Leibniz had used in the text of 1683-86 cited above); it is *itself* the expression.

Let us turn to what I take to be the key text for understanding Leibniz's version of the Confusion Theory of Body the *De modo distinguendi phaenomena realia ab imaginariis* of 1683/84. Leibniz writes there, "Substances have Metaphysical matter or passive power insofar as they express something confusedly, and active power, insofar as they express something distinctly."<sup>30</sup> Contemplating this passage, Robert Adams reservedly (though correctly, in my view) suggests that Leibniz may be leaning toward what I have identified as the Confusion Theory of Body. Adams suggests that for Leibniz, what we in fact see when we see a kitten pouncing on a ball of yarn are "certain internal properties of the kitten's soul: its seeing the string and intending to seize it. And how do I perceive those psychological properties? By far the most plausible answer is that I read them off certain properties of the kitten's body: its structure, spatial position, and movements."<sup>31</sup> Adams goes on to suggest, in view of the more evidently Leibnizian belief that each monad expresses and perceives each other monad in expressing and perceiving its own body, that Leibniz also believes that what we perceive when we perceive a monad's body is that monad itself, under the aspect of corporeality.

Of course, on this account of the way each monad expresses and perceives each other monad through the mediation of phenomenal bodies, it might not be clear how aggregates could ever be perceived, i.e., how we perceive, in addition to

things like kittens, stones as well, which have no internal properties at all. Even if it is acknowledged that every part of the stone is made up of a corporeal substance, it may still be unclear why this non-substantial collection of corporeal substances presents itself to a confused perceiver as, in some sense, a thing in its own right. I don't have room to address this problem here, but simply note that it is one.

Adams identifies a number of other texts in which Leibniz holds "that each created monad expresses and perceives everything else *by* expressing and perceiving its own organic body."<sup>32</sup> Most of these are from the early 18<sup>th</sup> century, though there are also two passages from the Leibniz-Arnould correspondence. Indeed, much of this central, middle-period correspondence is concerned with the relative distinctness of a subject's perceptions, and Leibniz repeatedly seeks here to resolve talk of causal relations between bodies into talk of the more distinct expression of one body by another, which appears at the phenomenal level as the latter bringing about an effect in the former.<sup>33</sup> Causal relations can be accounted for in terms of degrees of distinctness of perception of the substances purportedly in causal relation to one another.

In the Arnould correspondence we also find Leibniz affirming that a body's being the body of some substance can also be accounted for in terms of the clarity of perceptions. A body belongs to the individual to which it belongs because there is "a more distinct expression of that which is now happening with regard to the body."<sup>34</sup> Leibniz maintains that the soul expresses most distinctly that which belongs to its body. If we agree that bodies don't have any independent existence in Leibniz's ontology then, again, this claim seems to be the same as the claim that a body is the body it is a confused (yet, in comparison with the universe beyond its body, relatively distinct) perception of the substance of which it is a body.

This account of things becomes more frequent towards the end of the 17<sup>th</sup> century and in the first decades of the 18<sup>th</sup>. In a letter to Sophie of February 6, 1706, Leibniz makes the nice, succinct point that the soul "represents bodies to itself through [selon] organs."<sup>35</sup> A minimal understanding of this claim is that the perceiving subject needs sense organs in order to access the external world at all. Another way is this: insofar as the perceiving subject is constrained to perceive through the filter of its sense organs, what it perceives are bodies. It perceives its body most distinctly, and this is what makes it *its* body; in virtue of the fact that it perceives everything else through this most-distinctly-perceived body, all other things strike this perceiver as so many other bodies.

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As we saw in Nicholas, the full story of the Confusion Theory of Body involves an account of God's unique ability to apprehend his creation without the mediation of bodiliness. The same is true for Leibniz. As he explains in the *Nouveaux essais*, it is precisely the corporeality of creatures that makes intuitive knowledge impossible. God, on the other hand, being simple, and thus independent of all mediating organs, can only apprehend the world intuitively: "God alone has the advantage of only having intuitive knowledge. But those fortunate souls, however detached they are from these heavy bodies, and even genies, however sublime they may be, although they have knowledge that is incomparably more intuitive than our own,... must also find difficulties in their paths."<sup>36</sup>

A created substance must be limited by a material body in order to be able to perceive other beings at all. Certainly, it would be nice to perceive the monad directly. But in view of the fact that we can't, we should not necessarily assume that it is body that is keeping us from doing this; we may just as well assume that it is body that enables us to perceive other substances at all. An i.v. in a patient's arm doesn't prevent her from getting nourishment; it is the only source of nourishment available to the patient who is in no condition to eat, even if, ideally, she would not need its help at all and could gulp down her food with abandon.

### **IV. Idealism's Net, and How Far to Cast It**

For Adams, Leibniz's idealism consists in the fact that bodies can be completely explained in terms of the perceptions of immaterial souls. As I hope to have rendered plausible, however, the explicability of body for Leibniz in terms of the confused perceptions of substances that are in themselves simple does not at all require that we identify him as an idealist, at least in the modern sense. Rather, confusion is the essential ingredient of a hylomorphic entity, and this confusion, at one level of description, may be identified as bodiliness.

Don Rutherford, in contrast to Adams (though not, perhaps, an immediately obvious contrast), believes that both realism about corporeal substance and reductive monadological idealism are complementary ways of seeing the world, "one from the point of view of reality as it is in itself, a system of harmoniously related monads; the other from the point of view of the order determined by those monads' expression of themselves as embodied creatures naturally subordinated to one another. There is thus no problem with Leibniz's asserting, as he does, that reality consists solely of monads and their harmonious perceptions."<sup>37</sup> This is, I think, the right approach, given the important additional observation that the

compatibility between these two accounts does not amount to what Adams has identified as idealism. The Confusion Theory of Body may be said to differ from modern idealism, in so far as the latter is rooted in a representationalist theory of mind, while the former is motivated, as we have seen in Plotinus, Nicholas, and Leibniz, in no small part by theological concerns. It is the imperfection of created substances that causes their confusion and dazedness. To perceive without confusion would be to lose one's distinctness from God; if every creature were to perceive without confusion, there would simply not be a world at all.

Within the premodern context in which the Confusion Theory of Body emerges, to say that one is confused in perceiving body is something very different from saying that one is *mistaken* in believing that there is body. As Leibniz significantly puts it in the passage from the *Specimen inventorum* cited above, perceptions are confused, yet clear.<sup>38</sup> It's no mistake to perceive bodies: as far as created substances are concerned, bodies are the only means available of perceiving the order of coexistence, i.e., of perceiving other substances. Since it is only through representation of the order of coexistence within the monad itself that the monad has any access to its world, being windowless, being a world apart, representation is a very important capacity indeed. Far from being unfortunate, confusion is a monad's only way out of itself, its only means of accessing what Nicholas calls 'alterity'. Modern idealism emerges only when the external world becomes a 'problem', when the epistemological worry arises as to how the mind might access it. On the view we have been examining, in contrast, there simply is no such worry; it just is the nature of the mind to represent the order of the world; the confusion of this representation is not in any respect a reason for doubt.<sup>39</sup>

There is, indeed, a way of casting the idealist net broadly enough to include just about everyone in the history of philosophy, save, perhaps, for Paul Churchland and a few others—people who apparently believe that, in philosophical analysis, ideas can be eliminated from the ultimate account of things, in favor of talk of the motion of atoms or the firing of neurons. When we cast it so broadly, we indeed capture Leibniz along with the rest. If we restrict the label, on the other hand, to those simply intent on reducing the 'thingliness'—to borrow a term from Heidegger—of entities to subjectivity in such a way as to avoid the problem of how one gets out of one's own subjectivity to see how the representation of the thing stands up to the thing itself, then we are left with a much shorter list, one that certainly includes a modern thinker like Berkeley. But it is fair to say that this classificatory term captures Leibniz no more than it does Plotinus. For both of these thinkers, in spite of their immense separation in time, differ from Berkeley

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in that their account of body has nothing at all to do with skeptical concerns about the epistemic inaccessibility of the material substratum behind the appearances. Rather, the Platonist motivation for what indeed looks on the surface like phenomenalism issues from a need to distinguish between the manner in which less-than-divine, finite creatures apprehend the world, from the way in which the world would appear if they weren't in this lowly state.

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*Notes*

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<sup>2</sup> Robert Adams, *Leibniz: Determinist, Theist, Idealist*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 1994), 217.

<sup>3</sup> Daniel Garber, "Leibniz and the Foundations of Physics: The Middle Years," *The Natural Philosophy of Leibniz*. Ed. Kathleen Okruhlik and James Robert Brown. (Dordrecht: Reidel, 1986), 27-130.

<sup>4</sup> A VI iv 1369. "Nullo modo probari potest ratione naturali, quod dentur substantiae divisibiles seu corporeae." References to the works of Leibniz are abbreviated as follows: **NE** = *Nouveaux essais sur l'entendement humain* (Paris: GF-Flammarion, 1990); **RA** = *The Yale Leibniz. The Labyrinth of the Continuum: Writings on the Continuum Problem, 1672-1686*. Tr. and Ed. Richard T. W. Arthur (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2001).

<sup>5</sup> RA 247. "*Corpus est substantia quae agere et pati potest. Materia est principium*

passionis, *Forma principium actionis.*”

<sup>6</sup> Glenn Hartz, “Inconsistency in Leibniz’s Metaphysics of Body is Consistent with his Strategy,” *Vorträge des VII. Internationalen Leibniz-Kongreß*. Ed. Hans Poser, 1 (2001): 470-477.

<sup>7</sup> André Robinet, *Architectonique disjonctive, automates systémiques et idéalité transcendente dans l’oeuvre de G. W. Leibniz* (Paris: G. Vrin, 1986).

<sup>8</sup> Glenn Hartz, “Why Corporeal Substances Keep Popping Up in Leibniz’s Later Philosophy,” *British Journal for the History of Philosophy* 6, 2 (1998): 192-207.

<sup>9</sup> RA 235. “[N]atura animae seu formae esse perceptionem aliquam et appetitum.”

<sup>10</sup> In personal conversation.

<sup>11</sup> Brown has in mind here Loemker’s persuasive argument in “Leibniz and the Herborn Encyclopedists,” *Journal of the History of Ideas* (1961): 61, 22, 323-338.

<sup>12</sup> Christia Mercer, *Leibniz’s Metaphysics: Its Origins and Development* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2001).

<sup>13</sup> Plotinus, *Enneads* VI 6, 1 1-5. Tr. A. H. Armstrong (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1988).

<sup>14</sup> Plotinus, *Enneads* VI 9, 4 1-10.

<sup>15</sup> See, e.g., *Enneads* VI 9, 2 35-40.

<sup>16</sup> Nicholas of Cusa, *De coniecturis*, Eds. Josef Koch and Winfried Happ (Hamburg: Felix Meiner Verlag, 1988), 27.

<sup>17</sup> RA 127-221.

<sup>18</sup> See, e.g., *Monadology* 74, AG 222.

<sup>19</sup> Nicholas of Cusa, *De visione Dei*. Tr. Jasper Hopkins. (Minneapolis: Banning Press, 1988), ch. 14, 62.

<sup>20</sup> Dietrich Mahnke, *Leibnizens Synthese von Universalmathematik und Individualmetaphysik* (Tübingen: Niemeyer Verlag, 1925), 216.

<sup>21</sup> Nicholas of Cusa, *De coniecturis*, 166.

<sup>22</sup> Nicholas of Cusa, *De coniecturis* 15.

<sup>23</sup> Nicholas of Cusa, *De coniecturis* 55.

<sup>24</sup> Nicholas of Cusa, *De coniecturis* 125.

<sup>25</sup> Nicholas of Cusa, *De docta ignorantia*. Tr. Jasper Hopkins. (Minneapolis: Banning Press, 1981), Bk. II, ch. 6, 73.

<sup>26</sup> Mercer, *Leibniz’s Metaphysics*, 175.

<sup>27</sup> RA 59. “Mihi videtur Omnem mentem esse omnisciam, confuse. Et quamlibet Mentem simul percipere quicquid fit in toto mundo; et has confusas infinitarum simul varietatum perceptiones dare sensationes illas quas de coloribus, gustibus,

tactibusque habemus.”

<sup>28</sup> A VI iv 1493. “Semper corpus nostrum percipimus, id est confusum aliquid ex omnibus motibus in ipso; ut cum audimus sonitum maris, etsi singulorum fluctuum actiones non distinguamus.”

<sup>29</sup> RA 309. “[U]naquaeque substantia, exprimit totum Universum secundum situm atque aspectum suum, quatenus caetera ad ipsum referentur, et hinc necesse est quasdam perceptiones nostras etiamsi claras, tamen confusas esse, cum infinita involvant, ut coloris, caloris, et similibus. Quin imo substantiae finitae multiplices nihil aliud sunt quam diversae expressiones ejusdem Universi, secundum diversos respectus et proprias cuique limitationes... Itaque quod Hippocrates de corpore Humano dixit, de ipso universo verum est, omnia conspirantia et sympathetica esse.”

<sup>30</sup> A VI iv 1504. “Substantiae habent materiam Metaphysicam seu potentiam passivam quatenus aliquid confuse expriment, activam quatenus distincte.”

<sup>31</sup> Adams, *Leibniz: Determinist, Theist, Idealist*, 286f.

<sup>32</sup> Ibid, 287. His entire list includes LA 90f., 112f.; G II 253 (from June 20, 1703); G IV 530ff., G IV 545 (both 1702); A VI vi 132f. (*Nouveaux essais*, 1703-1705); G VII 567 ; C 14. As was brought to my attention by a referee for an earlier draft of this paper, there is also a draft of the *De modo distinguendi* dated to 15 April, 1676 (A VI iii, 511).

<sup>33</sup> AG 76.

<sup>34</sup> AG 77.

<sup>35</sup> G VII 567.

<sup>36</sup> NE 388.

<sup>37</sup> Donald Rutherford, *Leibniz and the Rational Order of Nature* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1995), p. 230.

<sup>38</sup> It is clear from this choice of wording that Leibniz is consciously borrowing his language of clarity and confusion from the related Cartesian notions of clarity and distinctness. For Leibniz, the antonym of ‘confusion’ is not ‘clarity’, but ‘distinctness’, and, in line with Descartes’ precise definitions of these terms, this is an important distinction to make. One key text for understanding the relation of Leibniz’s notion of confusion to Descartes’ clarity and distinctness is the *Logica de notionibus* (VI iv 1211-1299), dated by the Akademie-Ausgabe editors to approximately 1685. Let us just say here that he consciously appropriates these terms from Descartes, but reintegrates them into a premodern metaphysics of body to which Descartes certainly had no interest in applying them.

<sup>39</sup> As one of the referees for this article rightly notes, Leibniz’s metaphysics of

body cannot be entirely understood without reference to Cartesian philosophy, and this presupposes a familiarity on Leibniz's part with Descartes' skeptical arguments about our knowledge of the external world, a familiarity that is even in evidence in the first draft of the *De modo distinguendi* of 1676 (A VI iii 511). Indeed, in some obvious sense Leibniz was a modern philosopher, and could not help absorbing the influential philosophical arguments of his day. Nor, indeed, did he seek to avoid these. Still, the fact that he is *au courant* of 17<sup>th</sup>-century debates does not mean that, if we are looking for the most important sources of the view of bodies according to which they are rooted in the sort of perceptions appropriate to created substances, we will not do much better to search in the premodern, unskeptical heritage of Leibniz's thought than in contemporary, 17<sup>th</sup>-century concerns about the mind and its access to the world.