

Comments on Dan Garber's Book, *Leibniz: Body, Substance, Monad*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009.

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Bob Adams and I are undertaking the pleasant task of commenting on Dan Garber's new book, *Leibniz: Body, Substance, Monad*.¹ In a review article entitled "Leibniz on Freedom and Necessity," published in *The Philosophical Review*, of Bob Adams's book, *Leibniz: Determinist, Theist, and Idealist*, I said this of Bob's book:

In my own private pantheon of great works of Leibniz scholarship it ranks at the top along with Gaston Grua's *Jurisprudence universelle et theodicee selon Leibniz*.²

Dan Garber's new book should be added to this quite short list. It is an extraordinary work, the fruit of an unusually penetrating and agile mind probing at the deepest level of scholarship the work of one of the great minds – as Bob Adams once put it – “one of the most brilliant intellects of all time.”

1.

There are various approaches that philosophers have taken to the study of the great philosophers, Leibniz included. Bob, Dan, and I have followed pretty much the same path: in Bob's words – “..patient and careful attention to the actual meaning of Leibniz's writing in their historical context...” And the justification for this approach that Bob offers resonates with me, and, I suspect, with Dan as well. It is this:

One reason for the philosophical importance of patient and careful attention to the actual meaning of Leibniz's writings in their historical context is that he was indeed a great philosopher, great enough that an arbitrary interpretation of his work, more relevant to our historical context than his, is unlikely to be as interesting philosophically in the long run as what he actually thought. Indeed, the very strangeness of his context, and some of his thoughts, is a boon for philosophy. Progress in philosophy is more likely to consist in understanding possible alternatives than arriving at settled conclusions. And we are familiar enough with the familiar; part of what the great dead philosophers offer us is alternatives to our usual way of thinking – alternatives thought out in great depth and with uncommon rational sensitivity.³

Dan's book has a central thesis, which he has been refining for a number of years. One major idea is expressed thus in his introduction:

One of my main theses is that in the middle years, Leibniz had not yet come upon the monadological metaphysics that will characterize his later years... Instead, what one finds there is a metaphysics grounded in corporeal substances, extended unities of matter and form. This thesis, which I first defended ...in 1985 has raised a lot of opposition; there are many who still hold the traditional view that it's all monads all the time from the late 1670s (or even earlier) on to the end of Leibniz's life.⁴

I can't resist some personal comments on this quotation. The 1985 paper mentioned therein is "Leibniz and the Foundations of Physics: the Middle Years," a paper that has become deservedly a classic in our field. In a footnote to that paper Dan wrote: "Much of the material in this paper was developed in the course of a seminar I gave at Princeton University in Fall 1982." I was one of the participants in that seminar, which remains the most extraordinary seminar in which I have taken part. In the same footnote Dan dedicates the paper to his first born child, who he notes: "...was born at almost the same time as the paper was." In fact, I conducted the seminar on the day of birthing, presenting, among other items, an analysis of Leibniz's notion of something being possible-in-itself, although inconsistent with something that obtains of necessity. That account, which I subsequently published, was thoroughly demolished by Adam Elga in a term paper for a seminar that I offered at Harvard.

The central thesis just mentioned is a piece of a more general thesis that Dan outlines in the last paragraph of the introduction to his book in this manner;

I want to begin and end firmly anchored to the world of bodies in which we live. This is where Leibniz began his first studies of the physical world in the late 1660s and early 1670s, and he never lost interest in understanding the material world. On my story, Leibniz only later adds a metaphysical sub-basement of non-extended monads as part of an attempt to make larger sense of the created world. However, in doing so, he doesn't necessarily lose his grip on the material world. His last problem, as I see it, is how to put these two together, how to understand the relations between the bodies that we experience and the monads that are, in some sense, their metaphysical foundation. And, as I shall argue, this is a problem that Leibniz never solves to his complete satisfaction.⁵

Before I undertake some comments on the substance of Dan's book, I want to spend a little time bringing to your attention what an achievement it is. As is

clear from the short summary above of the position Dan supports in his book, it is important for Dan to temporally locate a large share of Leibniz's writings relevant to his theses, digest them, and then draw inferences based upon the results of his research. Bear in mind that the vast majority of the relevant writings are in the form of drafts never published during Leibniz's life time. The ensuing problems are genuinely mind boggling. The problems of scholarship here can be daunting. Here is a small example. The correspondence between Leibniz and Arnauld is of considerable importance for Dan's project. Yet copies of the letters received by Arnauld differ in respects that matter from drafts retained by Leibniz, and it becomes important to establish whether the differences represent changes inserted by Leibniz at various times when he entertained the idea of publishing the correspondence, and, if so, when those changes were made. Dan has done the home work in incredible detail, never losing sight of his main target. I found his accounts of Leibniz's early efforts in natural philosophy impressive. This is material I took on at one time and finally gave up on ever understanding. The accounts of Leibniz's thinking, early, late, and, of course, in the middle are detailed, always plausible, scrupulously fair to those who have offered alternative accounts, and presented in Dan's lucid writing style. Indeed, reading Dan in this book is very much like listening to him in a seminar, with the humor included. He has done the heavy lifting in a way that allows him to refer to one interpretative theory as "bugs within bugs," and another as the theory that "...it's all monads all the time.." such that you know exactly what he means.

On occasion I have defended one of the alternative interpretations of Leibniz – not quite "...it's all monads all the time.." but that it was pretty much monads by another name from the Arnauld correspondence on. I don't intend to defend that thesis here today. Dan has gone some way toward convincing me that he is right. I think that much of what is so valuable in Dan's book can be gleaned without making a decision on that matter. In pressing his case with such insight and power Dan has shed light on the interstices of Leibniz's various theories about bodies, substances, and monads so that we can learn what it is that the initial quotation from Bob Adams suggests we should learn from studying the great dead philosophers in the case of Leibniz without reaching final conclusions about just when he held whatever it is he did hold. So what I'm going to concentrate on in the remainder of my remarks is this: I have no doubt that Dan's book will set much of the agenda for Leibniz scholarship for a considerable time to come; I hope so. What I will do is suggest some areas where Dan takes us as far as we have been taken, but where,

it seems to me, there is yet more work to be done.

2.

After exploring two paths that led Leibniz to the revival of substantial forms and the positing of corporeal substances as the basic elements in his ontology—considerations based on the requirement of unity in basic elements, and considerations connected with his understanding of force and activity, in chapter 5 Dan turns his attention to Leibniz’s approach to the notion of an individual substance that is front and center in the *Discourse on Metaphysics*. It is – and Dan recognizes it to be – a strange brew. And, again as Dan notes, the approach in the *Discourse* not only appears to have led Leibniz to many of the same conclusions that he reached from considerations on unity and force, but, in addition, it appears to be his main basis for reaching some rather striking conclusions about the causal activity of individual substances.

The main items confronting us here usually go under names such as the following: The Complete Individual Concept Theory of Substance, the Predicate-in-Notion of Truth, and what Dan calls the Non-Communication Thesis. We need to say something about each. Let’s start with some words from Leibniz—after-all these are his ideas. In paragraph 8 of the *Discourse on Metaphysics* the predicate-in-notion of truth is put this way:

..all true predication has some foundation in the nature of things, when a proposition is not identical, i.e., when the predicate is not expressly contained in the subject, it must be contained in it virtually...

Or, as Leibniz put it in his more austere logical writings—a categorical, affirmative proposition, whether singular or universal, is true just in case the concept of its predicate is contained in the concept of its subject. The fact is that the theses Leibniz put front and center in the *Discourse on Metaphysics* in some what lackadaisical fashion were the subject of on-going, deep and productive investigations in logic in which he engaged contemporaneously with the metaphysical investigations on display in the *Discourse*. The basic ideas of this theory of truth were generalized by Leibniz to cover propositions, whether affirmative or negative, and whether universal, singular, or particular. And the theory of truth that resulted was combined with a logic based on concept containment that is subtle and elegant. The resulting apparatus was to be applied to a rational language that Leibniz set out to develop simultaneously. Since whatever substances a theory admits are intended as the basic individuals admitted in said theory, a theory of truth for propositions about

individual substances ought to suffice to handle propositions about non-substantial individuals as well. Given this background, which is nowhere on display in the *Discourse* itself, it is not surprising that Leibniz would announce in paragraph 8:

This being so, we can say that the nature of an individual substance... is to have a concept that is sufficient to comprise ...all the predicates of the subject to which this concept is attributed.

And it is not surprising that Leibniz would go on to affirm that this is not true of non-substances, thus yielding the complete individual concept theory of substance. The heavy lifting – the sorting out of individuals that are substances from those that are not – has already been done in developing the details of the rational language and the metaphysical investigations on which those details are based.

Nonetheless, the next paragraph of the *Discourse* surely comes as a jolt, beginning thus: “There follow from this several notable paradoxes.” Included among the “paradoxes” are some of Leibniz’s favorite metaphysical theses, including in later paragraphs what Dan calls the Non-Communication thesis, which Leibniz puts this way in paragraph 14:

Each substance is like a world apart, independent of all other things, except for God; thus all our phenomena, i.e., all the things that can ever happen to us, are only consequences of our being...We could therefore say in some way and properly speaking, although not in accordance with common usage, that one substance never acts upon another .. nor is acted upon by it, if we consider that what happens to each is solely a consequence of its complete concept alone, since this idea already contains all its predicates ...

The obvious thought is this: why can’t one of the predicates in Jake LaMotta’s complete concept refer to the property of being knocked senseless by Ray Robinson? As before, the right place to look for an answer is Leibniz’s constraints on the notion of a basic individual, i.e., an individual substance, constraints apparently built into his conception of what follows from the fact that an individual is an individual substance. Lots of good work has been done on the origins of Leibniz’s thinking concerning this problem by Christia Mercer and Don Rutherford, among others. And Dan, as one would expect, adds to our understanding of the problem. No doubt it is a fundamental principle for Leibniz that in order for an individual to count as an individual substance it must be active. Dan does a thorough job of drawing consequences from this principle, particularly as it pertains to Leibniz’s criticisms of the occasionalism of Malebranche. I share the tentativeness of Dan’s conclusion of his efforts to locate Leibniz’s reasoning favoring the non-communication thesis

as displayed in this passage in which Dan concludes his discussion:

And so, one might say, the argument that establishes the activity of an individual substance establishes it to such an extent that there is no room for another finite substance to act on it.⁶

One might say; and perhaps Leibniz did. But the question remains – how come?

There is an unusually passionate passage in a letter from Leibniz to Lamy in which Leibniz inveighed against the occasionalist thesis that only God can be causally active:

In order for a creature to be weak and dependent, must it be without any power? And in order for the Creator to be supremely powerful, must He alone be powerful and active? Because God is infinitely perfect, would He allow no perfections to creatures? You would prove in the same way that because He is the supreme Being, He is the only Being, or at least the only substance.⁷

Similarly, I am inclined to ask Leibniz – in order for LaMotta to count as an individual substance who is active, as individual substances must be, must he never be acted upon by the likes of Robinson? And if so, how come? There has been much good work done in an effort to locate Leibniz's best thinking on this matter, including Dan's recent efforts and Bob's as well. Still it seems to me that there is work to be done. Consider the following items from a letter from Leibniz to de Volder:

"Nothing," you say, "prevents substances of the same nature from acting on each other." But you know that philosophers have denied any action between similar beings. And what is there that prevents substances that differ in nature from acting on each other? When you have explained this, you will see that your explanation prevents all finite substances from influencing each other—not to mention that all substances are different in nature, and there are no two things in nature that differ in number alone.⁸

Leibniz here gives de Volder a home work assignment – much like those David Kaplan gives in his presentations from time to time. I really wish he had done the homework for us. Prior to commenting briefly on this passage I want to present another passage that Leibniz added after this one and subsequently deleted before mailing the letter to de Volder.

...if it is claimed that substances do not remain the same, but that different substances, following upon prior ones, are always produced by God, this would be to quarrel about a word, for there is no principle in things by which such a controversy can be decided. The succeeding substance will be considered

the same as the preceding so long as the same law of the series... persists, which makes us believe in the same subject of change, or monad. The fact that a certain law persists that involves all of the future states of that which we conceive to be the same – this is the very fact, I say, that constitutes the enduring substance.⁹

The first passage quoted – the one with the Kaplan like home work assignment – claims that each individual substance is different in nature from every other. It brings to mind Leibniz’s claim in the *Discourse on Metaphysics*, paragraph 11 “.. That what St. Thomas assures us with respect to angels – that each one is a lowest species – is true of all substances.” I suppose there is some chance that pursuing a study of Thomas’s angelology might shed some light on these matters, but, frankly, I haven’t found it helpful on this score. Nor do I find Leibniz’s use of the identity of indiscernibles here of much use in this matter.

The problem is set in the first quoted passage, but I find the second passage more suggestive of where we might look for resolution. And, in order to reap the benefits of this wonderful passage we need not suppose that Leibniz actually thought that there was no intellectually respectable way to decide between the view that individual substances endure numerically one and the same over time, and the view that what are taken to be such substances are actually momentary individuals that can be thought of as grouped together in ways that allow them to do duty for individual substances, persisting through time. In any case, the idea that some “law of the series” constitutes each individual substance is to be found in numerous texts from various periods in Leibniz’s career. And it is plain that Leibniz thought of each such series as containing the initial state of some substance and the causal consequences thereof. Obviously, if this strategy is to do the work Leibniz requires of it, the non-communication thesis must be presupposed, otherwise we will get collections of states that belong to more than one substance. The ideas that I have been outlining here are not new; they are to be found in Louis Loeb’s *From Descartes to Hume*, and Bob Adams’s *Leibniz: Determinist, Theist, Idealist*, as well as a book of mine. But I think that they deserve more investigation than they have received. No doubt it is difficult to construct an argument in favor of the non-communication thesis from these considerations, but I think that they provide a useful starting place for investigating Leibniz’s motivation for accepting it. And I think that theological motivations may play a decisive role in his acceptance of it.

There are numerous passages in which, after considering the possibility that

there are no finite individuals that persist one and the same over time, Leibniz then noted that were we to accept this view, we might as well agree with Spinoza that there is but one substance, which substance is infinite, and that what pass for finite substances persisting numerically the same through periods of time are actually just modes of the one infinite substance. And, to the best of my knowledge, none of these passages contains an argument against Spinoza's view. You may say: of course they do; Leibniz was offering what he took to be a *reductio ad absurdum* argument in these passages, since he regarded Spinoza's scheme – one infinite substance with infinitely many modes – as metaphysically impossible. I am not at all convinced that Leibniz saw Spinoza's scheme as metaphysically impossible; rather, I am inclined to suppose that he saw it as theologically unacceptable, because it failed to provide for finite moral agents responsible for their conduct.

3.

On pages 85-86 Dan puts the matter of the indivisibility of corporeal substance this way:

..corporeal substances are indivisible in the sense that one cannot take a corporeal substance and split it into two parts, each of which is equally well a corporeal substance, soul or form unifying a body, and each of which can be properly said to be *the same* corporeal substance that existed before the split.

But this cannot be exactly what Dan wants. Nothing is divisible in this sense. You can split a piece of tile – to take an example from the Leibniz-Arnault correspondence of something that Leibniz regarded as divisible – into two pieces certainly, but not into two pieces, each of which is identical with the original, unsplit piece of tile. When Dan turns in chapter eight to consider what might have led Leibniz to the view that any entity composed of parts is no substance, that is, to ultimately reject the idea that there are composite substances, he considers again an example from his earlier discussion – the case of planarians – worms which, when cut in two, are capable of growing a new head in the what was the tail section of the original. On page 316 Dan writes:

Though the body of the planarian can be cut, at most one of the two pieces can count as the continuation of the original planarian, the one in which the original soul continues to function as the form. This is the sense in which they [corporeal substances] count as indivisible, even though they have parts.

So the idea seems to be this: an entity is indivisible just in case it remains numerically one and the same under decomposition. Thus a composite substance, for example, a corporeal substance, is indivisible just in case it remains one and the same even if various parts of it are removed. Obviously, a simple substance, one totally lacking in parts, has the height of indivisibility, so to speak. But Dan has made a very strong case for the thesis that at least in the middle years of his career Leibniz held that there are composite substances, e.g., corporeal substances, that have parts, or, at a minimum, are deconstructible component-wise, and, yet are indivisible. In the last two chapters of his book Dan considers various possible and plausible explanations for Leibniz's apparent ultimate rejection of the idea that any individual other than a simple substance truly satisfies the test of indivisibility, required in order to be an individual substance, i.e., a basic individual in an acceptable ontology.

I find what Dan has to say on this matter informed and penetrating. I want to add a line of enquiry that at most is a supplement to what he offers – perhaps just a matter of emphasis. Once again, I am focused on Leibniz's requirement that both the unity conditions and the identity-over-time conditions for individual substance be non-conventional. Consider an individual composite entity C. For C to be an individual substance meeting Leibniz's rigorous standards it must be the case that there are non-conventional conditions according to which C at t1 and C* at t2 (t1 and t2 distinct) are said to be numerically identical. And, of course, there are, according to Leibniz. What is required is that there is a substantial form F such that F informs all and only the components of C (other than F itself) at t1 and F does the same for the components of C* at t2. This criterion allows C and C* to be a composite individual, and for the individual in question to differ component wise from t1 to t2. But surely it must have crossed Leibniz's mind that if this idea is to satisfy his high standards for being anchored in the nature of things, and, thus not be a matter of convention, it must be the case that the notion presupposed here – that F informs various components to form a single individual – is also well-defined and in a non-conventional way. My suggestion is that Leibniz had doubts on just this matter, and that these doubts led him to have doubts about the possibility of there being composite substances, at least as basic individuals. Just when these doubts set in is an issue. It is important to bear in mind, as Dan does, a distinction Leibniz referred to on occasion as that between a substance in concreto and a substance in abstracto. A substance in abstracto is really not a substance per se; rather it is an abstract entity that plays the role of a substantial form in any individual substance in concreto, including a simple substance. By contrast, a substance in concreto is a

basic concrete individual. A philosopher may doubt the existence of substances in abstracto, i.e., substantial forms as aspects of concrete individual substances, but assuming that there are such things, it is a matter of definition that they inform in such a way as to yield a concrete individual substance. Granted this still leaves us with the problem of elucidating the informing relation, still matters are significantly more problematic when the item alleged to be doing the informing is itself a concrete individual substance. And for most of Leibniz's thinking about composite substances that is the case being envisaged.¹⁰

In paragraph 11 of the *Discourse On Metaphysics* Leibniz noted that he advocated “.. rehabilitation of the almost banished substantial forms..” It is a worthwhile project to investigate the account of “informing” available in scholastic literature with which Leibniz was familiar. The account offered in Suarez, for example, turns on a rather involuted causal scheme allegedly relating form to matter. For obvious reasons this is not an option for Leibniz. Arnauld offered Leibniz an opportunity to explain just this topic in his correspondence with Leibniz, who studiously ignored the opportunity.¹¹ For a time he tried to make due with what was open to him, using as much as he could tolerate of Suarez's approach, by making use of the pre-established harmony. He abandoned such efforts in response to Tournemine's objections. It may be no coincidence that Leibniz's claims that for an individual to be a substance it must be simple, i.e., without parts, are dated from about the same time. These matters are quite complex and deserve much more examination than they have received. Consider Leibniz's response to Tournemine's objection that the pre-established harmony – which Tournemine took to be the basis of Leibniz's account of union, hence, informing – will not do. Leibniz, after stating that he was only trying to explain the relation we perceive between the soul and the body, wrote:

But since this metaphysical union... is not a phenomenon, and since we have not even been given any intelligible notion of it, I have not taken it upon myself to look for an explanation of it.¹²

But it would appear that an account of this metaphysical union may be what Leibniz needs. Without a non-conventional account of the glue allegedly provided by a substantial form Leibniz lacked a clear account of the unity and identity-over-time conditions for an individual being a composite substance. This is not an epistemological matter. It is not a question of providing criteria we can actually employ to determine whether an alleged individual is really a corporeal substance rather than an aggregate. Leibniz remained reserved about our ability to make

COMMENTS ON GARBER

such distinctions in practice. It is a basic metaphysical concern about the nature of ultimate reality.

I find Dan's discussion of the *viniculum substantiale* interesting and important. Leibniz's efforts with respect to the *viniculum substantiale* are often seen as a theological exercise in which Leibniz had no stake. But both Dan and Bob have made note of passages where Leibniz seemed to consider the notion independent of its theological applications. Perhaps this could be viewed as Leibniz's last stand with respect to providing a rigorous account of the "informing" function of simple substances, and thus making room, were it successful, for composite substances as basic individuals. I think that it is at least as plausible to view these as passages in which Leibniz was taking note of the ontological costs of a rigorous account of metaphysical union, hence, informing, hence, composite substances as basic individuals. Costs he then took to be excessive. On this topic, as on many others, Dan has pointed out various questions in Leibniz scholarship whose resolution will be aided by the publication of papers still unavailable.

I have noted just two topics concerning which Dan's scholarship sets the stage for further investigation. I have left discussion of the major thesis of Dan's wonderful book in the competent hands of Bob Adams.

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Notes

- ¹The material that follows was presented at a colloquium at Princeton University celebrating Dan Garber's new book, *Leibniz: Body, Substance, Monad*. The comments are almost exactly as presented on that occasion, hence, a bit informal by the austere standards usually associated with an article in a scholarly journal.
- ²Sleigh (1999) p. 246.
- ³Adams (1994) pp. 5-6.
- ⁴Garber (2009) p. xix.
- ⁵Garber (2009) pp. xx-xxi.
- ⁶Garber (2009) p.195.
- ⁷G iv 586-587.
- ⁸G ii 264.
- ⁹Ibid.
- ¹⁰See Sleigh (1990) for a discussion of the distinction between substance in concreto and substance in abstracto in Leibniz.
- ¹¹See G ii 107 for Arnauld's query, and G ii 118-119 for Leibniz's evasion. Chapter ten of Rutherford (1995) is especially helpful on these matters.
- ¹²G vi 595.