

Reply to Robert Sleigh and Robert Adams

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Let me begin by thanking Bob Sleigh and Bob Adams for taking the time to read my book carefully and agreeing to review it. I can't think of two people whose views on my work mean more to me. I would also like to thank them both for their very generous remarks.

Over the years, Robert Sleigh has favored the view that in the Correspondence with Arnauld and related writings, Leibniz held a position very close to that of the later monadological writings, something quite contrary to my own view. (See, e.g., Sleigh [1990], pp. 112-115.) In his review, though, he remarks that I have "gone some way toward convincing" him that I am right in holding the view that in the middle years, corporeal substances are basic. [41] But Sleigh's words are carefully chosen, as always. Though I am very pleased that I have gone "some way" toward convincing him, Sleigh doesn't really say just how far I have gone. I fear that I may still have some way to go before he is entirely convinced of my view.

Instead of dwelling on that contentious question, Sleigh focuses on two other related issues. One such issue is the role of the "law of the series" in constituting individual substances and in grounding the non-communication thesis. In my book, I offered some speculations on where this thesis comes from, focusing particularly on the idea of the Complete Individual Concept. But Sleigh argues that we must also look to Leibniz's doctrine of the law of the series as that which defines the individual substance. The other issue that Sleigh discusses is the relation between the substantial form and the matter or body of the corporeal substance. Here Sleigh wants to say that it is difficulties with this relation that, in part, led Leibniz to abandon the corporeal substances of his earlier view and adopt the view that all there are are simple substances or monads. Both of these suggestions strike me as complementary to the views I set forward in my book. I am very happy to accept them as further areas to explore to fill out the basic theses I advance in the book. And some day, perhaps, I will be able to convince Bob Sleigh more fully of the truth of the larger theses about the centrality of corporeal substances in Leibniz's middle years.

Let me now turn to the comments by Robert Adams. Bob and I have been

disagreeing about monads and corporeal substances for years, and I'm not surprised to see that he hasn't given up yet! The issues are subtle and difficult, and a full discussion of the case that Adams makes would have to go far beyond the modest bounds of a response to his kind review. But let me sketch out the reason why I still hesitate to follow his line of interpretation.

Adams divides his discussion into three parts: the later Leibniz ("Endgame"), the transition between the middle Leibniz and the late, and the middle years. First a word about the last years. Here Adams and I are pretty much in agreement about what's going on in the texts. There are monads, and they are in some sense metaphysically basic for Leibniz. We also agree that there are some differences in how Leibniz conceives of the world of monads relating to the world of bodies. He and I agree that there are two basic accounts in the texts. On one account, bodies are conceived of as aggregates of monads, which are united together only in the perception of other monads: they are phenomenal in the way that figures are phenomenal in a Seurat painting, dots of color united by the perceiver. But there is a different account as well in the texts. On that account, the world of bodies is phenomenal in an almost Berkeleyan sense: the common dream of a multitude of monads. Adams acknowledges that these are genuinely different, as they are: "These are not two expressions of a single view, but two mutually inconsistent views of what bodies are." [56] Here we are completely in agreement. But then Adams continues and suggests that "why couldn't or shouldn't Leibniz have thought that the accounts are in disagreement not about a metaphysical fact, but about a practical decision?" [56] He also goes on to suggest that the inconsistency about whether or not aggregates of monads can make up genuine corporeal substances in the period may also be a practical matter. [57] Here I am at a loss. I cannot figure out what the practical considerations in question might be. And I can't help thinking that there really is a metaphysical question at issue concerning the two views of the relation between monads and bodies. In the one case, bodies correspond in some way to aggregates of monads; in the other case, they don't. But even so, the differences between us on the later Leibniz, the "Endgame" are not large.

However, we still seem to differ rather substantially about the middle years and the transition I see from the middle years to the late. Adams agrees that "it is a sound generalization that one is not in full possession of a philosophical thesis or idea that one has never explicitly formulated." And so, he concedes, "Garber gives us ... good reason to suppose that the monadological metaphysics is not completely present in Leibniz's thought before the mid-1690s." [59] But still, he

is not altogether happy with my claim that in the middle years, Leibniz held views inconsistent in some ways with his later monadological metaphysics. He writes:

Let's grant that some central monadological doctrines were not fully articulated by Leibniz in the middle years. But if monadological conclusions were already implied or demanded by doctrines that Leibniz already held, the principle of charity in interpretation suggests that in interpreting his middle years we should not without very strong evidence ascribe to him doctrines that are *positively inconsistent* with those monadological conclusions. [61-2]

Adams then tries to show that the position in the middle years is not “positively inconsistent” with the monadological metaphysics. Indeed, as I read him, perhaps between the lines, Adams is trying to show that Leibniz’s “middle years” view can be read as a kind of veiled or confused anticipation of the later monadological metaphysics.

First of all, I think that Adams is drawing more from the principle of charity than he is entitled to. I hold that the monadology of the later years is a result of working out tensions and inconsistencies in his earlier views, something that I suspect is quite typical of any serious thinker whose thought evolves over the course of a career. In this way, there are ways in which Leibniz’s thought in his middle years was consistent with the later monadology, and ways in which it wasn’t. Of course, when attributing *any* views to Leibniz in the period, I have an obligation to establish that he really did hold the views that I attribute to him; this is just good scholarship. But it seems to me that the principle of charity puts no *special* burden of proof on me when I claim that his earlier thought contained elements that are “positively inconsistent” with what he later came to think. Reasonable people often revise what they previously believed by realizing their mistakes, rejecting views that they formerly held, and adopting new ones in some ways inconsistent with their former beliefs.

But more interesting are the textual arguments Adams offers that Leibniz’s “middle years” views were actually consistent with the later monadology. Here Adams points to two different inconsistencies I note between the middle and the late, and tries to show that relevant texts can be interpreted in a way that makes them consistent with the later monadology.

The first issue concerns corporeal substances and souls. Adams quotes me as saying that in the middle years, unlike in the later monadology, “the basic entities in the world are corporeal substances.” [Garber [2009], 316, quoted at 62] Adams takes this to entail that I am attributing to Leibniz the view that substantial forms

or souls are less basic than corporeal substances. But, Adams argues, this isn't right: in this period substantial forms and souls are usually (though not always) conceived of as substances too by Leibniz, and he often attributes to them a status as basic as corporeal substances. I certainly don't want to deny this. But it is also true that in this period, forms or souls never exist for Leibniz apart from the corporeal substances of which they are constituents. A corporeal substance, of course, never exists without a soul or form either, which would make the corporeal substance dependent on the soul or form too. But even so, my claim would be that when you count up things in the world in the middle years, the ultimate individuals are not corporeal substances *and* souls, but corporeal substances *with* souls. It is in this sense that I want to say that corporeal substances are the metaphysically basic entities in the world.

It is true, as Adams emphasizes later in his review, that these corporeal substances are taken to be perceivers. [67-9] But on my reading they are perceivers because they *have* souls and not because they *are* souls in some sense. Never in the "middle years" does Leibniz suggest, as he will later do to de Volder, that "there is nothing in things except simple substances and in them perception and appetite." [G II 270] When in 1690 Fardella suggested something like that, Leibniz corrected him in no uncertain terms. Fardella objected that "[w]hen dealing with a multitude of stones ABC, either stone A or B or C must be understood first. But it is not the same with a soul which, with other souls, does not constitute body." [A6.4.1670 (AG 104)] Leibniz replied: "I do not say that the body is composed of souls, nor that body is constituted by an aggregate of souls, but that it is constituted by an aggregate of substances." [A6.4.1670 (AG 105)] The context of the discussion suggests strongly that the substances in question here are not non-extended simple substances, but corporeal substances, like living animals. In the statement of the view to which Fardella objects, Leibniz talks about animals and plants as containing souls, by virtue of which they constitute substances. [A6.4.1669 (AG 104)] And in the answer to Fardella's objection, Leibniz compares the aggregate that is an inanimate body to a fishpond, where the fish are the genuine corporeal substances that make up the aggregate.

But must the matter associated with the form or the body associated with the soul be in some sense extended? This is the second supposed inconsistency between middle and late that Adams attributes to me, and that he would like to undermine. Adams's argument here is subtle and complex, and it would not be appropriate here to enter into a full reply. But this seems to be what he has in mind. Adams draws

much of his discussion of the issue from a letter Leibniz wrote to Paul Pellisson-Fontanier in November/December 1693 concerning the Eucharist. Now, Adams agrees that what underlies extension in bodies is primitive passive power or force, resistance and impenetrability: it is from primitive passive power or force that extension arises in bodies. This primitive passive power is what Leibniz designates as matter in the substantial composite, in contrast with the active force or power, which he designates as form. This, then, is the argument:

The letter to Pellisson provides an obvious reason for expecting Leibniz to say that the subject of primitive passive power in a finite substance is non-extended. For if substantial form and primary matter, as primitive active and primitive passive power, cannot be separated ontologically from each other in any creature, what shall we say of the substances with which, as Garber agrees, Leibniz also often identified souls? Did he not still think of them as the seat of primitive active power or substantial form? And if he did, could he deny that they are also the seat of primitive passive power or primary matter? But I see no reason to think that Leibniz, in the middle years, regarded souls as extended. [66]

If I understand Adams correctly, the argument goes something like this. (1) Active and passive power or force, soul and matter are inseparable. (2) Soul is non-extended. Therefore (3) matter pertains to a non-extended subject and (4) the soul/matter unity is non-extended. I'm not convinced by the argument. The soul can be non-extended while, at the same time, being part of a composite substance that is extended. Or, better, the soul can be a constituent of a composite substance that exhibits resistance and impenetrability, that from which extension arises. Strictly speaking such a composite corporeal substance isn't extended in the way a Cartesian substance is essentially extended: for Leibniz extension is not the kind of thing that can really be in the world. (See the discussion of the status of extension in Garber [2009], pp. 155-66.) But it definitely isn't non-extended either. Again, the context suggests strongly that Leibniz is talking about extended substances in this connection. The letter to Pellisson is about the Eucharist, and the substance under discussion is the Host. Nothing in the letter suggests that Leibniz holds that the Host is non-extended.

Adams wants us to read the discussion of form and matter in the Pellisson letter with what he takes to be a parallel discussion in the de Volder letters in mind. In that famous passage, which Adams quotes on p. 61, Leibniz presents the soul and the matter as constituents of the monad, which is, presumably, non-extended. He

wants to see this conception of form and matter in Leibniz's earlier writings as well. But again, I resist. In the context of the letter to de Volder, this is a decidedly novel conception of form and matter. Leibniz knows this full well, and because of that, he feels that he has to explain it pretty explicitly to his correspondent, who can't be expected to understand Leibniz's views without special explanation. But in the earlier writings, Leibniz offers no special explanation of what he is doing. This suggests to me that he had intended the terms 'form' and 'matter' to be taken in the commonly understood way. That is to say, in the earlier writings when Leibniz talks about form and matter, soul and body, I think that we can presume that he means for them to come together and form the normal extended composites of everyday experience.

Let me put the point more generally. In his review, Adams' explicit claims are quite modest: if I understand him correctly, he is attempting to show only that Leibniz's doctrine in the middle years is not "deeply inconsistent" or "positively inconsistent" with the later monadological metaphysics. [59, 62] Which is to say, he wants to show us that there is a way of interpreting Leibniz's doctrines in the middle years that makes them consistent with the later thought. Adams has certainly shown that we can do that. However, I also think that such readings are serious distortions of Leibniz's intentions. If a principle of charity is applicable at all, I think that it should entail that we take Leibniz at his word unless there is a good reason not to. When, in the middle years, he writes to Arnauld, or Fardella, or L'Enfant, or Pellisson about a world of living entities with souls and bodies, corporeal substances understood on analogy with living things, we should assume that that is what he meant. It is reasonable to assume that when writing to these correspondents, Leibniz had intended to communicate something to them. Using common philosophical terminology interpreted in the kinds of idiosyncratic and later Leibnizian ways that Adams needs to suppose in order to make his case clearly undermines the possibility of any real communication. Without the kinds of special explanations that Leibniz did later offer to de Volder, we can only assume that his correspondents understood Leibniz in the normal acceptance of the words.

But it is also worth pointing out that all of this is considerably short of establishing that Leibniz held the monadological metaphysics in his middle years, as Adams would certainly acknowledge. Even if it can be shown that Leibniz's words in that period could be made consistent with the later doctrine, Adams acknowledges that Leibniz didn't, as a matter of fact, ever advance explicitly anything like the later monadology. I completely agree with Adams when he writes that "[i]t is a sound

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generalization that one is not in full possession of a philosophical thesis or idea that one has never explicitly formulated.” [59] Such is the case for the monadology in the middle years.

Let me end by thanking Robert Sleigh and Robert Adams once again. I look forward to continuing this fruitful conversation in the years to come.

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References

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