

**Comments on Daniel Garber's *Leibniz: Body, Substance Monad* for the Eastern Division Meeting of the American Philosophical Association, December 2011**

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**0. Introduction**

Thank you all for coming. It is special honor for me to be commenting today on Daniel Garber's *Leibniz: Body, Substance and Monad*. When I first entered graduate school Dan's previous book *Descartes's Metaphysical Physics* had recently appeared, and it made a huge and lasting impression on me. All of a sudden I saw Descartes's project in a much different, more intriguing light. This Garber fella had managed to open up a new area of Descartes's thought to me, to tease out with great care his philosophical arguments, and to situate both in a broader historical context in which they seemed to me at least much more at home. In short, Dan's Descartes's book is one of the main reasons why I work on Leibniz. And now we have his rich, learned, and provocative book on Leibniz to wrestle with. I am certain that it will similarly inspire another generation of early modern scholars as well – hopefully they won't all be moved to work on Kant!

As many, perhaps most of you already know at the heart of Dan's book is a thesis he first tentatively introduced in his seminal 1985 paper "Leibniz and the Foundations of Physics: The Middle Years." In that piece, Dan conceded that the then standard view of the relationship between Leibniz's physics and his metaphysics is more or less correct concerning his later years. On that picture, as

Dan puts it, “the real world for Leibniz is just the world of mind-like simple substances, monads, and the like. On this view, the bodies of physics (along with their geometrical and dynamical properties) enter only as phenomena, one mind’s confused perceptions of multitudes of other distinct, mind-like monads” (28). Dan denied, however, that this is the only picture of the relationship between metaphysics and physics that Leibniz offers us. Pushing back against idealist readings of earlier commentators such as Russell, Couturat, Geuroult, Dan suggested that a very different picture is to be found in Leibniz’s writings from the mid-1680’s and ‘90’s when Leibniz was both a practicing physicist and metaphysician. On that picture, he claimed, “physics is a science not of appearances and of phenomena; in the era of the *Discourse* and *Specimen Dynamicum*, physics is ... an account of the laws that govern a real world of quasi-Aristotelian substances” (28).

What was introduced as a “preliminary sketch” almost twenty-five years ago, is developed in *Body, Substance and Monad* as a robust, full-blooded account of the development of Leibniz’s thinking about substance from his earliest to his latest years, drawing on an unprecedented array of texts including many recently edited and even unedited works. It is an impressive and pain-staking case, and I have no misguided intentions of trying to refute it in the next twenty minutes. Rather in the spirit of encouraging further discussion of the themes raised by Dan’s book, I’d like to raise three broad questions in connection with his central thesis that <-- this is mostly quotation from Dan --> “we should isolate the middle years as a separate period in Leibniz’s intellectual history ... distinct from what precedes and what follows” during which he espoused “a metaphysics grounded in corporeal substance,

extended unities of matter and form,” having not “yet come upon the monadological metaphysics that will characterize his later years” (xix).

### **1. First Question: Is there an end to the Middle Years?**

According to Dan, Leibniz is led from his early metaphysics to a metaphysics of corporeal substances primarily by two lines of thought. The first line is rooted in concerns over unity: taking unity to be a necessary condition for being, Leibniz postulates Aristotelian formal natures in order to secure the unities necessary for the existence of a physical world. The second line is rooted in concerns over motion and force: having become more critical of mechanistic physics, including his own earlier efforts, Leibniz postulates Aristotelian formal natures in order to ground true motions and his new science of dynamics. These two lines converge with one another to confirm for Leibniz a picture of the world as constituted not by extension and minds, but rather by extended, corporeal substances modeled on living organisms. Although one finds even in Leibniz’s earliest writings tendencies that will persist throughout his career, his explicit rejection of his early efforts in physics, as well as the somewhat chaotic tenor of his early writings, gives us plausible reasons, I think, to see the introduction of corporeal substances as a clear development in Leibniz’s metaphysics, and consequently for seeing his middle years as being genuinely bounded on the lower end.

But what about the upper end? Is there good evidence that Leibniz ever abandons his metaphysics of corporeal substances? In this case as well, Dan sees Leibniz as being led to a novel view of substance by two main lines of argument (344-349). The first line runs once again through Leibniz's concerns over unity: pressing the demands of unity harder, Leibniz commits himself to a foundation of simple substances. The second path runs through Leibniz's understanding of matter: Dan conjectures that Leibniz is led to postulate a new "sub-basement" of immaterial substances in order to provide an irreducible ground for the passive powers of his physics. These two lines of thought are thus supposed to converge on a new world constituted by unextended, soul- or mind-like, immaterial substances. As Dan himself allows, however, and as Leibniz's later texts bear out, these arguments do not seem to ever rule out corporeal substances (see, letter to de Volder 20 June 1703). Although the demand for true unities and the drive towards grounding physics is consistent with the postulation of immaterial substances, and might even be thought to require them when pressed to the limit, neither argument, it seems to me, entails the *rejection* of corporeal substances.

Similarly, Leibniz's texts – and no one knows them better than Dan – might also appear to stop short of committing Leibniz to the abandonment of the metaphysics of his middle years. As we all know, Leibniz's talk of corporeal substances and his emphasis on living organisms persists throughout his career. Thus, for example, the *Principles of Nature and Grace* (1714) opens with Leibniz recognizing not only simple but also composite substances (PNG 1) and arguing that "Each monad, together with a particular body, makes up a living substance" (PNG 4).

Similarly, even the so-called “Monadology,” while it begins with a discussion of immaterial substances soon takes up at considerable length the issue of living organisms constituted by bodies and souls (Mon 63). At several places in the book, Dan cautions his audience not to read the theory of monads into Leibniz’s earlier writings without strong evidence; but one might also press the correlative concern, and wonder if there is not an equal danger of underplaying the textual evidence of the persistence of corporeal substances into Leibniz’s most mature writings.

Finally with respect to the question of whether there is a clear upper bound to the metaphysics of Leibniz’s middle years, one might see a tension even in Dan’s own meticulous reconstruction. To put the point in brief, in overly stark terms, *Body, Substance, Monad* begins by declaring that the metaphysics of Leibniz’s middle years represents “a genuine period, distinct from what precedes and what follows.” It ends, however, on a seemingly different note. In the last main chapter, Dan suggests that while in his later years Leibniz “wants to maintain the importance of monads as a foundation for everything ... he never gives up the idea of a world of bodies ultimately grounded in living things, bugs in bugs to infinity ... he wants to figure out how to relate the two to one another ... [and] is simply unsure how to go” (387). In the paragraph that follows, destined I think to be often quoted, Dan concludes:

Historians of philosophy want to find Leibniz’s “considered view” ... But I’m not sure that there is a considered view to find. We tend to think of people’s lives and thought in neat packages, with a beginning, a middle, and an end. Leibniz’s life had an end, as do all mortal lives, but as often happens, he died in *media res*, at a moment when he was still very much engaged in his life and

in his intellectual projects. It is unsurprising then that he left behind many loose ends in his thought, questions he considered but did not resolve. In his later years, on my reading, Leibniz was struggling with the problems and struggling towards a considered view on these issues. But he died before he got there. (388)

I want to emphasize that I don't think there is a flat contradiction here: depending on how one fills in the details, one might consistently maintain both that the metaphysics of Leibniz's middle years may be sharply demarcated from the metaphysics of his later years, and that in his later years Leibniz had no considered metaphysical view. But the two theses do, it seems to me, pull in opposite directions. To the extent that Leibniz had no considered metaphysical view in his later years, I find it more difficult to see how the metaphysics of his middle years might be cleanly distinguished from the metaphysics of his later years, especially if one allows, as Dan seems to do, and as I think we should, that the metaphysics of the middle years never really disappears.

## **2. Second Question: Does Leibniz have two inconsistent metaphysical views?**

One might fairly object that I have thus far neglected an important possible way of marking the end of Leibniz's middle years. For one might identify the end of Leibniz's middle years not by his abandonment of corporeal substances, but rather by his adoption of immaterial substances. This approach will, of course, re-raise some of the same issues already discussed – the evidence concerning when (if at all)

Leibniz introduces immaterial substances is as difficult to sift as the evidence concerning when (if at all) Leibniz abandons corporeal substances. There are, for example, passages from quite early in Leibniz's career in which he suggests that immaterial souls may be counted as substances in their own right. In an early piece that has been entitled "On the Present World," and dated to the early 1680's, Leibniz appears to countenance not only "corporeal substances," but also "spiritual" substances or minds, whose operation "is called reflection or thought" (A.VI.iv.1506-7/LOC 283-5). Likewise, in his famous correspondence with Arnauld, Leibniz speaks of "the soul being an individual substance" (G II.68). Passages such as these seem to clearly anticipate later, more famous passages, such as those from his correspondence with Fardella and De Volder in which he seems to suggest that there are *both* corporeal *and* immaterial substances (A.IVB.1671/AG 105).

The attempt to mark the end of Leibniz's middle years by the arrival of immaterial substances, however, may also serve to introduce another question that I'd like to raise for discussion, namely, does Leibniz offer us two deeply inconsistent metaphysical analyses of the created world – something akin to the contrast between Aristotelian hylemorphism and Berkeleyian idealism – or two complementary, consistent analyses – something more akin to, say, the contrast between contemporary biology and chemistry? This question has more recently divided Leibniz's commentators along new lines, effectively pitting both those who see Leibniz as consistently advocating for idealism as well as those who see him as consistently advocating for realism, against a more radical interpretation according to which Leibniz simply has no single consistent first-order metaphysical view at all.

Passages such as the one I quoted earlier in which Dan expresses doubt “that there is a considered view to find” in Leibniz’s later metaphysics make it tempting to place him squarely in the camp of the incompatibilists (as I’ll call them). In an important footnote in *Body, Substance, Monad*, however, Dan explicitly rejects any such assimilation. Contrasting his own view with that of Catherine Wilson and Glenn Hartz, he writes:

On my view, Leibniz was fully conscious of both perspectives, but he didn’t think that they were inconsistent, nor was he willing to leave the two positions ‘suspended ... without reconciliation’. Rather, I argue, he saw his project in his last ten years as trying to figure out how exactly they were to come together in a single consistent system. (348, fn 86)

If I understand Dan’s view correctly, he sees Leibniz’s later metaphysics as drawing out and extending his earlier metaphysics of corporeal substances. The project is never completed in the sense that puzzles and unclarities remain, but the metaphysics of monads is not, nor did Leibniz see it as, a wholly rival metaphysical scheme to be entertained as an inconsistent alternative account of the created world.

As a compatibilist myself, I fully approve of Dan’s rejection of the idea that Leibniz is self-consciously working with two inconsistent theories. And I think Dan’s view here nicely dovetails with his suggestion that the same concerns over unity and foundations persist throughout Leibniz’s career, as well as with the textual continuities we’ve already noted. At the same time, however, the acceptance of compatibilism seems to me to somewhat undermine the possibility of drawing a clear distinction between Leibniz’s middle years and his later years by appeal to his

introduction of immaterial substances. For if the theory of monads is not a rival metaphysical scheme, but rather an extension of the theory of corporeal substances, driven by the same concerns that led to its introduction, and heralded by passages dating well within the 1680's, it seems to me that it would be misleading to suppose that the introduction of monads, by itself, marks "a breaking-point between Leibniz's middle and late metaphysics of body that happens sometime in the mid- and late 1690's" (315, fn 38).

### **3. Third Question: Should we look more widely for continuity?**

Perhaps more than anyone, Dan has helped to encourage a trend in the study of early modern philosophy towards greater historical sensitivity and contextualization. *Body, Substance, Monad* will without doubt serve as a model of that increasingly dominant approach, as well as a testament to the fruits it can bear. It is chock-a-block with historical detail, brings to light countless neglected texts, and tracks carefully the many bends and twists in the historical development of Leibniz's thinking about the topic of substance. No one could fault Dan for not having done his homework! And yet, as I imagine Dan would cheerfully acknowledge, the joy and worry of historical inquiry is that there is always more context to be had, always further pieces of the historical puzzle that might help to fill in the areas we are investigating. So far I have wondered out loud if there might be more continuity than is at first apparent between Leibniz's middle and late metaphysics, even when they are considered in relative isolation from other aspects

of his thought. In this last section, I'd like to ask further if Leibniz's writings on substance might not, at any rate, take on a greater coherence if viewed against the backdrop of his broader intellectual commitments, and, in particular, if viewed against the backdrop of what we might call his overarching conciliatorism.

One main thread of Leibniz's overarching conciliatorism is to be found in the *philosophical eclecticism* he learned as a student of the great German humanist Jakob Thomasius. That eclecticism encouraged both the study of a wide range of traditions, including Platonism, Aristotelianism, and Mechanism, as well as the endeavor to acknowledge and incorporate the views of a broad spectrum of earlier and contemporary thinkers. It is thus no accident that we find throughout Leibniz's writings key notions inspired by past thinkers, including, for example, the notions of form, entelechy, and conatus, as well as an almost compulsive sprinkling of references to major and minor figures. The eclecticism that Leibniz imbued in his youth, however, went further than the mere collecting and citing of disparate philosophical ideas and thinkers. The grander project it suggested to Leibniz was to show how such disparate views might be harmonized with one another – to reveal the deeper truths that others had either partially grasped or confusedly expressed. While long overlooked, this aspect of Leibniz's thinking has now been helpfully explored by the likes of Patrick Riley, Marcel Dascal, and Christia Mercer.

Another main thread of Leibniz's over-arching conciliatorism is to be found in his *theological irenicism*, which itself might be thought of as being fueled by a pair of commitments. First, that there is a domain of philosophical truths discoverable by unaided human reason and experience that can at least in principle be discovered

with unerring certainty. Second, that there is, in addition, a domain of truths “above reason” that can only be known through divine revelation, and should never be held with absolute dogmatic conviction. This pair of commitments serves as the theoretical basis for Leibniz’s ambitious, if perhaps overly optimistic program for reuniting the divided Christian sects of his time. In brief, his proposal is to supply a metaphysics that is consistent with the views of all permissible sects, and which nonetheless leaves open certain delicate and disputed questions bound up with revelation. While similarly long overlooked, this aspect of Leibniz’s thinking has also recently received helpful attention from the likes of Maria Rosa Antognazza, Daniel Fouke, and (again) Christia Mercer.

Given that the topic of substance greatly divided philosophers and theologians alike in the early modern period, and contributed to precisely the sorts of fissures that Leibniz was eager to smooth over, it seems to me that Leibniz’s conciliatorism might be a helpful place to look for further insight into both the continuities and discontinuities in his thinking about substance. On the one hand, attention to Leibniz’s conciliatorism might allow us to see greater continuity in some aspects of his thinking about substance. Some apparent bends and twists in the presentation of his first-order views – which can occur in the same piece, even the same paragraph - might be viewed as emphasizing different aspects of larger, unifying picture rather than abrupt shifts of considered opinion. On the other hand, greater attention to Leibniz’s conciliatorism might also bring help to reveal different, genuine developmental aspects relevant to his thinking about substance. My own still crude impression, for example, is that while Leibniz’s conciliatorism persisted

throughout his career, the ambitions of his philosophical eclecticism only waxed with new encounters and discoveries while the ambitions of his theological irenicism waned as he suffered the losses of various allies and met with continued – to him, unexpected – resistance from Catholics and Protestants alike.

## **Conclusion**

I gather that when Dan first started talking about corporeal substances in the 1980's, he met with more than a few incredulous stares, and that the literature itself was still very much in the grip of the logical focus of Russell and Couturat. My how times have changed! In my comments today I've tried to raise some questions concerning what I take to be the central thesis of Dan's book, namely, that "we should isolate the middle years as a separate period in Leibniz's intellectual history ... distinct from what precedes and what follows" (xix). Those questions themselves, however, seem to me to be greatly indebted to Dan's pioneering work. Does Leibniz ever really abandon his metaphysics of corporeal substance? Is that metaphysics inconsistent with the monadic metaphysics more familiar from his later years? Might we find greater continuity between Leibniz's Middle Years and Late Years by taking more into account his broader intellectual concerns? That these are the sorts of concerns I've been pestering Dan about today is a testament, I think, to how successful he has been in reorienting our entire approach to understanding Leibniz. While it would no doubt be true to say *Body, Substance, Monad* will exert an enormous influence on

future generations of Leibniz scholars, it would be even more accurate, I think, to say that in many important ways it already has.