

Comments on Daniel Garber's "Metaphysics and Theology:  
The Role of the *Monadology* in Leibniz's *Essais de Théodicée*"

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In his rich and engaging essay, Professor Garber asks most centrally, "...what was the relation between Leibniz's metaphysical project as set out in the so-called 'Monadologie' and the more theological project in the *Essais de Théodicée*?" His answer is, in short, that there isn't much of a relationship between these two great works. Furthermore, he takes this result to be evidence of Leibniz's not being a systematic philosopher in the spirit of Descartes or Spinoza. In these brief comments, I revisit Garber's two central questions in turn and offer some moderating resistance to both of his conclusions.

**1. Is the *Monadology* in the *Theodicy*?**

As Professor Garber rightly intimates, how one answers the question of whether the *Monadology* is present in the *Theodicy* depends in part on what one takes the central projects of these two great Leibnizian works to be. Garber offers a self-consciously narrow view of the project of the *Monadology*, describing it as supporting "the metaphysical claim that the ultimate constituents of the world are non-extended simple substances," and contrasting it with "the corporeal substance metaphysics that Leibniz held in his earlier years."

Garber also offers a relatively narrow view of the project of the *Theodicy*. While conceding that "The text in question is something of a rambling work, which

meanders through a large number of topics, including stories and observations of all sorts thrown in for good measure,” he emphasizes that “the central question is the problem of evil,” and more specifically the problem of moral evil as taken up in Part II of the *Theodicy* and the problem of physical evil as taken up in Part III.

If we understand the central projects of the *Monadology* and the *Theodicy* in the relatively narrow ways that Garber proposes, then I think we should agree that there isn’t much of the *Monadology* in the *Theodicy*. I hasten to add that I don’t think that this is a trivial result: I suspect that it tracks Leibniz’s hope that his general strategies for responding to the problems of moral and physical evil might be acceptable to those ignorant of, or even opposed to, his metaphysical atomism.

As Garber acknowledges, however, one might alternatively take a broader view of both the *Monadology* and the *Theodicy*. As noted, the *Monadology* covers a lot of ground in a short space, giving voice to, among other things, Leibniz’s views on generation, preformation, the immortality of the soul, pre-established harmony, the principle of sufficient reason, the principle of contradiction, divine punishment, divine reward and divine grace to pick just a few of its topics. It even talks a fair bit about organisms and the embodiment of souls – themes seemingly more to do with corporeal substances than with immaterial simples. If the *Monadology* is centrally about Leibniz’s reduction of the world to monads – and I think that it is not at all obvious that it is – the *Monadology* is also, at any rate, certainly about many other things as well.

Leibniz’s *Theodicy* (the work) and theodicy (the project) might also be viewed more broadly than Garber emphasizes in his essay. As he himself notes, the *Theodicy* is a wandering work, ranging over a wide variety of topics and themes including, for example, generation, preformation, the immortality of the soul, pre-established harmony, the principle of sufficient reason, the principle of contradiction, divine punishment, divine reward and divine grace to pick just a few of its topics. Similarly, Leibniz’s theodicy (the project) arguably goes right to the heart of his thinking about the relationship between being and goodness, and *via* that deep core is directly related to many central Leibnizian themes from the

principle of sufficient reason to the principle of plenitude, from relationalism about space to plenism about the actual world.

Viewed broadly then, I think that Leibniz's *Monadology* can be found in his principal apologetic work. Indeed, to be more specific, I think the *Monadology* might be said to be of a piece with the *Theodicy* in a least two significant respects. First, the views expressed in the *Monadology* are consistent – or are at least are intended to be consistent – with the views expressed in the *Theodicy*. If the *Theodicy* doesn't put Leibniz's monadic metaphysics on center stage, it also does not, as far as I know, contradict any of its rather controversial metaphysical theses. Second, there is considerable overlap in the premises and surrounding arguments of the two works. If their foci are rather different, their background assumptions and arguments are much the same. In short, while the *Monadology* and *Theodicy* may indeed highlight different regions of Leibniz's thinking, I see no reason for supposing that they do not represent compatible, even overlapping pieces of a single, coherent overall worldview.

## **2. Was Leibniz a Systematic Philosopher?**

This brings us to Professor Garber's second question, the question of whether Leibniz was or was not a "systematic" philosopher. In answering this question, Garber rejects Russell's suggestion that Leibniz's philosophy is especially suited to a geometrical presentation, and denies that Leibniz is systematic in the same way as Descartes and Spinoza were, or at least in the same way as Descartes and Spinoza aspired to be. According to Garber, although "there are interconnections between the various parts of his thought," nonetheless those parts "remain for Leibniz relatively autonomous domains that can be investigated independently of one another."

I think Garber is absolutely right to suggest that Leibniz believes that relatively independent progress can be made in different domains. In the nice passage from the *Discourse on Metaphysics* (section 10) that he quotes, Leibniz says as much, emphasizing that the geometer needn't "burden his mind with the famous

labyrinth of the continuum,” that the statesman needn’t “trouble himself with the great difficulties involved in reconciling free will and God’s providence,” and that “a physicist can explain some experiments, at times ... without needing general considerations from another sphere.”

Even these bold statements, however, it seems to me, fall short of committing Leibniz to the rejection of systematic philosophy. For the suggestion that progress might be made independently on different fronts is perfectly consistent with there being systematic connections between the most apparently disparate domains, and, indeed, such pronouncements are even consistent with the possibility that someone, perhaps a universal genius, perhaps a mathematician, scientist and statesman of first rank, might not only see and appreciate those connections, but exploit them to make new discoveries and advances. In short, the suggestion that progress might be made independently on many fronts seems perfectly consistent with, for example, Leibniz’s claim in the *Theodicy* that he has “established in a conclusive manner, a complete body of the main articles of knowledge that reason pure and simple can impart to us, a body whereof all the parts were properly connected and capable of meeting the most important difficulties of the ancients and the moderns.” (Huggard *trans.* p. 68)

As a first-pass metaphor for Leibniz’s thought, I therefore rather like the net analogy that Garber attributes to Michel Serres. To say that Leibniz’s thought is systematic like a net is not, I take it, to say that there is a direct connection between every element of his thinking, or that all his commitments might be lined up in a neat deductive derivation. Rather it is to suggest that there is a sometimes more, sometimes less hidden coherence to the seemingly disparate elements in Leibniz’s far ranging works; that despite initial appearances, they do hang together to a remarkable extent, with elements in one domain being coherently, often surprisingly, linked to elements in another domain. Such a network of stronger and weaker, more direct and less direct connections strikes me as a good Leibnizian middle ground between Russell’s overly optimistic deductive chain and Garber’s rather more pessimistic – if much more sonorous – “starry firmament.”

The enticing picture of a systematic Leibniz might, of course, still be spoiled by a closer examination of Leibniz's specific metaphysical commitments – and in particular by a closer examination of his views on substance. For those attracted to the image of Leibniz as a great system builder there is real reason to worry here. For it is, of course, not at all obvious how Leibniz's views on corporeal substances and immaterial simples might be coherently reconciled. Furthermore, in his *Leibniz: Body, Substance, Monad*, Garber has presented a detailed, sustained, and forceful case for there being important disconnects in Leibniz's treatment of substance both over time and even within his mature years. A full defense of the systematicity of Leibniz's thought will therefore ultimately have to meet the challenge of showing how his thinking about substance might be reconciled with his having a coherent philosophical system. Ironically, I think the first part of the *Theodicy*, in which Leibniz explicitly expounds his views on the relationship between faith and reason, between philosophy and theology, might be of significant help on that score. Be that as it may or may not, however, I think it can at least be said that supporters of a systematic Leibniz shouldn't feel particularly threatened by the relationship between Leibniz's *Monadology* and his *Theodicy* per se. Those two works could be the works of a non-systematic philosopher, but they could just as well be the works of a philosopher who holds that "all is perfectly connected in the order of things" (Huggard *trans.*, p. 124).