

SELF AND SUBSTANCE IN LEIBNIZ

Self and Substance in Leibniz

by

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Introduction

There is a close connection in Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz's mind between the notions of self and substance. R. W. Meyer, in his classic 1948 text, *Leibniz and the Seventeenth-Century Revolution*, writes that "the monad ... is nothing but a *représentation* (in both senses of the French word)¹ of Leibniz's personality in metaphysical symbols; and there was, under contemporary circumstances, no need to 'introduce' this concept apart from 'propounding' it."² It is not clear what Meyer means here except that from the consideration of his own self, in some way Leibniz comes to his concept of simple substance, or monad. Herbert Carr, in an even earlier work, notes that Leibniz held that "the only real unities in nature are formal, not material.... [and] [f]or a long time Leibniz was content to call the formal unities or substantial forms he was speaking about, souls. This had the advantage that it referred at once to the fact of experience which supplies the very type of a substantial form, the self or ego."³ Finally, Nicholas Rescher, in his usual forthright manner, states that "[i]n all of Leibniz's expositions of his philosophy, the human person is the paradigm of a substance."⁴ He continues, explaining something all students of Leibniz can understand, unfortunately: "Indeed it is only at this level that we humans can gain a cognitive grip on the realm of monads; in all other contexts, *individual* monads lie entirely outside the realm of our experience and knowledge."⁵

Undoubtedly, there is a close connection in Leibniz's mind between the notions of self and substance. But what is not agreed upon by commentators is the nature of the connection between self and substance. Is a self for Leibniz identical with a particular substance? Or, do selves merely *resemble* immaterial substances—a helpful device to get a handle on the mysterious monad? Ultimately, are Leibnizian selves best understood as Lockean unities or histories of consciousness? However, like his great rationalist forebears René Descartes and Baruch Spinoza, Leibniz's answer to this question has not garnered much scholarly attention. (The heretofore closest thing to an adequate discussion of Leibniz's notions of the self and of personal identity is found in Gaston Grua's *Jurisprudence universelle et Théodicée selon Leibniz*.) I remember telling one of my past mentors (a very astute man well-versed in the "rationalists") what I was currently working on and his response: "I did not even know that Leibniz had a theory of personal identity!"

The most complete articulation of Leibniz's theory comes in Book II, Chapter 27, of the *Nouveaux essais sur l'entendement humain* (*New Essays on Human Understanding*) (completed in 1704, first published in 1765), a point-by-point analysis of John Locke's theory of personal identity in *An Essay Concerning*

Human Understanding (second edition, 1694). Many who happen to read Leibniz's words on personal identity in the *Nouveaux essais* see Leibniz in basic agreement with Locke, whose own (contemporaneous) theory of personal identity was and still is widely known in philosophical circles. Certainly Leibniz is partly to blame for the (I believe, mistaken) impression that Leibniz is in basic agreement with Locke. We find Leibniz saying to Locke: "I concede . . .," "I admit . . .". Are such phrases serious? It is hard to tell. Probably, but we have to be careful in concluding as to what Leibniz really concedes to Locke. Often he is conceding something but it is not as generous as it might appear at first glance. (As noted by Gaston Grua, Leibniz often disseminated ideas he found probable or attractive without actually championing such ideas.⁶) Leibniz can appear overly conciliatory in the *Nouveaux essais* and even involves himself (as represented by Theophilus) in a sustained dialogue with "Locke" (as represented by Philalethes) at times as if they were proceeding from the same definitions, having the same objectives, and working under the same constraints. The passages on personal identity seem no different; consequently, it can be difficult to discern any substantial disagreement between Leibniz and Locke. No doubt Leibniz and Locke do share some of the same objectives and work under some of the same constraints. But, as we will see, such similarity in project does not translate into similarity of product.

1. Overview of Book

So how will we come to see that Leibniz's theory of personal identity stands on its own—that it offers an original, internally coherent, theory of personal identity? The first chapter "Am I Essentially A Person?" addresses the following question: I am a person, but am I essentially or most fundamentally a person? In other words, can I exist (or did I once exist) without being a person? I will argue that for Leibniz once a person, always a person. This is not true for Locke. So right from the start we find a significant difference between Leibniz and Locke.

The second chapter "What Makes Me A Person?" proceeds by showing that by taking the monad, itself an enduring perceiver, as a base and adding certain psychological attributes such as memory, self-consciousness, and rationality, Leibniz arrives at his conception of person. But commentators have charged that Leibniz's account of the psychological component of personal identity is inconsistent, and a first reading of Leibniz's *Nouveaux essais* certainly seems to validate that charge, since he says both that memory is necessary and that it is not. However, I will argue in the second chapter that there is no inconsistency in Leibniz's account of the psychological component of personal identity since Leibniz distinguishes between what is necessary for being a person from what is necessary for being *the same* person over time.

Monads—Leibnizian simple substances—are seemingly perfect candidates for persons. For, by all accounts, monads are immaterial, enduring substances distinguished by the content and clarity of their internally-driven and incessantly changing perceptions, yet each existing in preestablished harmony with all the others. Leibniz's monads are really a far cry from anything Locke takes to be a substance. They are certainly not "substrata" or things with "bare substantial

existence and duration.” Thus, substance in Leibniz’s hands is a much more promising candidate as a condition for personal identity than substance in Locke’s hands. Nevertheless, a number of commentators of Leibniz’s mature metaphysics have hesitated to attribute to him the unequivocal claim that persons are monads at all. They believe that after reading Locke’s *Essay*, Leibniz is so smitten with Locke’s conception of person as psychologically continuous being, that either Leibniz takes on Locke’s view without ever giving up his earlier understanding of person and as a consequence holds inconsistent views or actually abandons it in favor of Locke’s view that sameness of substance (that is, monadic identity) is not necessary for personal identity. In the third chapter “What Makes Me The Same Person?” I will argue that although Locke’s theory of personal identity certainly had some important influence on Leibniz, Leibniz never abandons his view that sameness of substance is necessary for the continued existence of the same person.

Leibniz remains committed both to an immaterialist notion of substance and an immaterialist explanation of thought. The latter claim follows from the former since thought must be caused by a substance. According to Leibniz, the unity of consciousness must necessarily be explained by or caused by a true unity, that is, a simple, indivisible substance.⁷ Locke, however, is committed neither to an immaterialist notion of substance nor an immaterialist explanation of thought (E II, 27, §§8, 21; E II, 1, §11). At most, Locke holds that a substance is a mere bearer of properties, with no distinguishing features of its own, that uniquely individuates it from other substances. (I say, “at most,” since at least one commentator holds that Locke properly speaking has no theory of substance at all.⁸) According to Locke, identity of substance (material or immaterial) has nothing to do with psychological identity, that is, of psychological properties, character, personality, memories, disposition, and attitudes.⁹ As Carol Rovane understands Locke: “the soul affords no explanatory insight into the phenomenological unity of consciousness, or any other form of psychic unity.”¹⁰ As a consequence, it is no surprise that Locke comes to reject the view that substantial identity (sameness of substance) is even relevant to personal identity. Such a difference between Leibniz and Locke cannot be overcome, I believe.

I will show in the fourth chapter “Could Thinking Machines be Moral Agents?” that the monadic conception of substance is also crucial in grounding Leibniz’s account of what it takes for a person to be morally responsible for past deeds, that is, morally identical with the perpetrator of those deeds. Commentators, however, have pointed to several passages in which Leibniz seems to deny that sameness of substance is necessary for moral identity. One exceptional passage seems to catch Leibniz in saying that a thinking machine could be a genuine moral agent. But this would entail the irrelevance of substance in judgments of moral identity, given that for Leibniz machines are not substances at all, but mere aggregates of matter. All the more reason, these commentators have asserted, to think that Leibniz is smitten by Locke. But I will argue in the third chapter that Leibniz never admits the possibility of thinking machines as

moral agents. Nevertheless, Leibniz does countenance the logical possibility of thinking machines, that is, mere aggregates of matter endowed with mental states.

But there is an apparently serious problem in reconciling Leibniz's views on moral agency with his monadological metaphysics. Leibniz believes both that there is no genuine causal interaction among monads or simple substances—they are famously “windowless”—and that moral agents do live and participate in a community. However, as argued in the third chapter, all moral agents are monads. So, how is it that non-interactive monads interact, so to speak? In the fifth chapter “Why Bodies?” I will argue that, according to Leibniz, monads cannot be part of the general order or connection of things without existing as united with a body, and hence embodiment is required for participation in a community of moral agents. I will also give an extended case for the surprising, thoroughly un-Lockean, and rarely defended claim that for Leibniz a disembodied monad could not even qualify for moral agency.

This is a major difference between Leibniz's and Locke's theories of personal identity that has previously been overlooked—there is definitely more emphasis on body in Leibniz's theory of personal identity than in Locke's. True, contrary to Descartes, Locke does not explicitly deny that we will be embodied in the afterlife. In paraphrasing 1 Corinthians 15:44, Locke writes that those with faith can expect to receive heavenly bodies which are “powerful, glorious, and incorruptible” (Wk 8, 174). But Locke does not seem to have independent philosophical reasons for such a view. For he writes to Lord Stillingfleet that “the resurrection of the dead I acknowledge to be an article of the Christian faith: but that the resurrection of the same body, in your lordship's sense of the same body, is an article of the Christian faith, is what, I confess, I do not yet know” (Wk 4, 303). Now, although his theory of personal identity can accommodate the possibility of Christian resurrection (whether that entails the resurrection of the same body or our acquisition of a qualitatively different body), nevertheless his account is perfectly consistent both with the possibility that we are thinking “machines” (i.e., aggregates of physical particles with the power of thought [E IV, 3, §6]) and that thinking machines do the thinking for us. But more relevant, in recalling the forensic nature of Locke's theory of personal identity, there is no commitment to the view that genuine moral agents must be embodied. So long as the individual consciously remembers his or her deeds, he or she is responsible for those deeds, whether those memories are being had by an immaterial substance that is embodied, or a material substance, or a disembodied immaterial substance.

It is this latter possibility that worries Leibniz. Unlike Locke it appears, Leibniz gives explicitly philosophical reasons for an embodied life, both in the present and the hereafter, *independent* of Christian faith. Whereas Leibniz rejects the idea that I am not essentially a person, he deeply approves of the Henry More's and Anne Conway's anti-Cartesian view that we are always embodied. He does not go so far as More and Conway in saying that spirit and body are merely two aspects of one and the same thing, but he does hold that I am a particular substance that is always united with a body. In fact, I will argue in Chapter 5 that for Leibniz I could not even qualify for moral agency unless I had a body. This is a view that seems

utterly contrary to Locke's way of thinking. (But I do not believe that Leibniz would go so far as Aquinas in saying that not only the soul, but also "this *flesh*, these *bones* ... are the principles of man's individuality."¹¹) I think that the issue of embodiment represents a significant divergence between Leibniz's and Locke's theories of self and personal identity, and a difference that has heretofore been missed.

The above chapters serve to answer not only what Leibniz means by *person* and *moral agent*, but also in great part what constitutes the logically necessary and sufficient conditions for the continued existence or survival of a person and a moral agent. But the sixth and final chapter will address the further (and currently popular) question: Under what conditions does a person secure over time what matters in survival? I will argue in "What Makes My Survival Meaningful?" that Leibniz holds first of all that meaningful survival presupposes sameness of substance. For it seems that for Leibniz the promise of sameness of substance might rationally be of some concern to us. Leibniz believes that the promise of the continuation of substance can and should console us—and thereby serve to ground meaningful survival—as long as continuation of substance entails continuation of memory or, in some other way, guarantees knowledge of what we have been. On the other hand, Locke cannot fathom the idea that a guarantee merely of substantial continuity can ground psychological identity, for again, Locke's account of substance (supposing he has one) is of a bare substratum.

Meaningful survival for Leibniz presupposes the memory or knowledge of what we have been (contra Spinoza). In other words, we would have no reason to desire a future state of survival if that state of survival did not guarantee the memory or knowledge of our past. Leibniz believes that this shows that Platonic, Spinozistic, and Cartesian promises of immortality cannot rationally console us. I will argue, however, that Leibniz fails to show that such a claim can be generalized to all situations. But Leibniz's direct concern is with immortality and the kinds of immortality God might have bestowed upon his subjects.

A couple of appendixes can be found at the end of this book. The first sketches some differences between Leibniz and Hume on the question of personal identity. The second tries to draw some contrasts between Leibniz's arguments for his views on self and substance and those Kant famously criticizes in his "Paralogisms of Pure Reason."

2. *Structure and Scope of Book*

Let me say a few words on the structure and scope of this book. Suppose that you were given the difficult task of formulating your own theory of personal identity. I believe that you would have to address and hopefully answer the following questions:

- You are a person, but are you essentially a person?
- What exactly does it mean to be a person?
- What are the conditions for remaining the same person over time?
- Could something non-human be a person?

What relation do bodies have to persons?
 What is rationally desirable in a person's survival?

Now, this book does not constitute an attempt at formulating a new theory of personal identity. It attempts to describe a past philosopher's theory. So what then of the above questions? I maintain that in coming to a good understanding of another's theory of personal identity—even a theory formulated centuries past—we must be able to answer those same questions. Indeed, sometimes I will refer to recent developments in the literature on personal identity to shed light on Leibniz.

I have decided to focus on a single topic. Sure, personal identity inevitably leads to much of the rest of Leibniz's philosophical system: individuation, force and activity, *petites perceptions*, justice, harmony, and theodicy. But I will defer much detail on these issues either to work I have published elsewhere or to work by others. For example, detailed discussion of the problem of individuation will be deferred to a couple of recent books on the topic: McCullough's *Leibniz on Individuals and Individuation* and Cover and O'Leary-Hawthorne's *Substance and Individuation in Leibniz*. Certainly more could be said on all these topics. However, the general question—What is Leibniz's theory of personal identity?—is hard enough. And it yields a manageable manuscript. My aim is not to give the definitive account of Leibniz's theory of personal identity—of self and substance—but to provoke further discussion.

NOTES

¹ I take it that Meyer is speaking of *représentation* both as description and as portrayal.

² R.W. Meyer, *Leibniz and the Seventeenth Century Revolution*, 120.

³ Herbert Wildon Carr, *Leibniz*, 83.

⁴ Nicholas Rescher, *G. W. Leibniz's Monadology*, 82.

⁵ Rescher, *G. W. Leibniz's Monadology*, 82. Compare Benson Mates, *The Philosophy of Leibniz*, 40.

⁶ Grua, *La Justice humaine selon Leibniz*, 213.

⁷ See Paul Lodge and Marc Bobro, "Stepping Back Inside Leibniz's Mill."

⁸ Edwin McCann. Forthcoming.

⁹ Harold Noonan, *Personal Identity*, 46.

¹⁰ Carol Rovane, *The Bounds of Agency*, 27.

¹¹ St. Thomas Aquinas, ST I, 29, 2.

Chapter One

Am I Essentially a Person?

You cannot see the spark in flint;
you cannot see the soul in man.
(Russian Proverb)

Our selves appear to be complex things, changing over time, sometimes radically. They also seem to be intimately connected with a particular organism, a body. Certain physical changes in our bodies, brought on by long-term suffering, for instance, seem to affect the way we think of ourselves (or “our selves”) from one time to another. Each of us also seems to possess the peculiar ability to change the kind of being we are, since we have the capacity for reflective self-evaluation—we can, in a way, reflect upon and monitor our own self.¹ By actively choosing to form “second-order desires” (to want to be moved by certain desires), we demonstrate that we are complex, changing individuals—not the sort of thing best understood as enduring, or so one argument goes.

A possible reply to this line of argument is not hard to fathom. Yes, the reply begins, our selves do appear to us in the way described above. But that description is far from complete. First, our selves, though seemingly complex and changeable, also appear *unified* over time, as if, to use a scientific analogy, a wide diversity of phenomena is brought into unity. Throughout the process of change, we are self-determining individuals, changing but unified as one individual. That is, whether best understood as unified systems, à la David Hume, or actual unities, à la Boethius, our selves *endure* through change.

Given that we do genuinely persist (that is, we are enduring things and change over time), what are we essentially? Let us assume that a genuinely persisting subject must necessarily fall under a *substance-concept* (to use David Wiggins’ term), one that gives an answer to the question “What is x essentially?” So, for example, if I am essentially a person, then the substance-concept I fall under is *person*. And, let us call those answers to the question—“What is x merely contingently?”—*phase-concepts*. So, for example, the concept *philosopher* is a phase-concept since no one is essentially a philosopher, and all of us began our lives as non-philosophers. It will also be useful to distinguish between permanent and non-permanent phase-concepts. For example: once a father, always a father; but presumably one can cease to be a philosopher. Lest there be any misunderstanding, it follows that one concept cannot serve both as a substance-concept of x and as a phase-concept of x.

Supposing that I am a genuinely persisting subject, what essentially am I? I am most certainly a person, being self-aware, rational, and morally responsible. But am I *essentially* a person? Can I exist (or did I once exist) without being a person?

Before we try to determine Leibniz's answer to this question, it is helpful to consider some fairly clear examples of both affirmative and negative answers from philosophers whose writings Leibniz was closely familiar with.

1. Descartes on the Self

According to Descartes, what am I essentially? Certainly not a man. Descartes rejects the Aristotelian answer; I am not a rational animal, except in perhaps a merely contingent or accidental way. Descartes provides us with two reasons why I am not essentially a rational animal. The first sounds like a bit of a cop-out: it is too difficult and time-intensive to nail down the meanings of 'animal' and 'rationality'. He writes in the Second Meditation: "What then did I formerly think I was? A man. But what is a man? Will I say 'a rational animal'? No; for then I should have to inquire what an animal is, what rationality is, and in this way one question would lead me down the slope to other harder ones..." (AT VII, 25/CSM II, 17). Descartes' second reason stems from the fact that he denies, at least in a provisional way, that he has a body.

In the very process of doubting, Descartes comes to the conclusion that he might exist without a body. This entails that thinking does not require a body or something material; therefore, my body is not essential to me. The fact that I have a body is true only in a contingent or accidental sense. Thus, according to Descartes, I am essentially a thinking thing (a *res cogitans*), and not essentially material (a *res extensa*). Descartes writes in *Discours de la méthode*:

I saw that while I could pretend that I had no body and that there was no world and no place for me to be in, I could not for all that pretend that I did not exist. I saw on the contrary that from the mere fact that I thought of doubting the truth of other things, it followed quite evidently and certainly that I existed; whereas if I had merely ceased thinking, even if everything else I had ever imagined had been true, I should have had no reason to believe that I existed. From this I knew I was a substance whose whole essence or nature is simply to think, and which does not require any place, or depend on any material thing, in order to exist. Accordingly the 'I'—that is, the soul by which I am what I am—is entirely distinct from the body, and indeed is easier to know than the body, and would not fail to be whatever it is, even if the body did not exist. (AT VI, 33/CSM I, 127)

"But what then am I?" Descartes answers: "A thing that thinks" (AT VII 28/CSM II, 19). Moreover, Descartes claims that thought is a property *essential* to me and thought is the *only* property essential to me: "[T]hought; this alone is inseparable from me. I am, I exist—that is certain. But for how long? For as long as I am thinking. For it could be that were I totally to cease from thinking, I should totally cease to exist. At present I am not admitting anything except what is necessarily true. I am, then, in the strict sense only a thing that thinks; that is, I am a mind, or intelligence, or intellect, or reason..." (AT VII, 27/CSM II, 18).

If I cease to be a thinking thing, then I necessarily cease to exist. However, a thinking thing, in Descartes' view, just is a person. So if I cease to be a person, I necessarily cease to exist. So it follows that I am essentially a person. Never was I a non-person, nor will I ever be a non-person. *Person*, according to Descartes, is a substance-concept.

2. *Conway on the Self*

The English philosopher Anne Conway, whose work Leibniz had read and admired, gives a fairly clear answer that radically diverges from Descartes': I am a person, but only contingently so. In *essence*, I am a living creature (that is, a spiritual body) and according to Conway just about everything counts as a spiritual body. Some caution is needed, however: the term 'spiritual body' is perhaps a bit misleading since there is for Conway no essential difference between spirit and body. Contrary to Descartes, she is a monist who holds that body is just condensed spirit while spirit is subtle body. She writes: "life and shape are different attributes of one substance" (CC ix, 8). 'Shape', as we might expect, refers to material extension. 'Life' Conway explains as:

spirit ... and light, by which I mean the capacity for every kind of feeling, perception, or knowledge, even love, all power and virtue, joy and fruition, which the noblest creatures have or can have, even the vilest and most contemptible. Indeed, dust and sand are capable of all these perfections through various successive transmutations which, according to the natural order of things, require long periods of time for their consummation... (CC ix, 6)

Conway imagines a horse as "a creature endowed by its creator with different degrees of perfection, such as not only bodily strength but also certain notions, so to speak, of how to serve his master. In addition, a horse exhibits anger, fear, love, memory, and various other qualities which are in human beings and which we can also observe in dogs and many other animals" (CC vi, 6). Conway proceeds to argue that a horse (one kind of spiritual body that happens to be a non-person) could eventually become a human (another kind of spiritual body that happens to be a person).

Her argument goes something like this: (i) Creatures (that is, spiritual bodies) by their very nature are mutable and can change for the better (CC vi, 6). (ii) Spiritual bodies cannot die naturally (CC vi, 6). (iii) Ultimately, all spiritual bodies all belong to the same order of being (that is, they all have the same essence and differ only by finite degrees (CC vi, 6). (iv) Hence, no particular species *x* so infinitely excels another, that an individual of any other particular species *y* cannot at some point be changed by gradations into a member of species *x* (CC vi, 6f). Conway illustrates: "Thus if someone places a stairs which is infinitely long and has an infinite number of steps, nevertheless the steps are not infinitely distant from each other, for otherwise there would be no possibility of ascent or descent" (CC vi, 6). It is important to be clear that for Conway, (v) even an individual who crosses over into another species, so to speak, preserves its

identity. As Jane Duran puts it: “[S]he has a *de re* view of individual essence.”² (St. Paul, for example, to employ a person Conway utilizes for such purposes, cannot be changed into another individual.) Now, (vi) a horse is not a mere machine or dead matter, as Descartes famously claims, but has some kind of spirit (CC vi, 6). For example, Conway speaks of horses obeying their masters and thereby achieving a higher moral-slash-spiritual status (CC vi, 6). (vii) Therefore, a horse (say of species *x*) can eventually, at some point in its moral/spiritual journey, become a human (say of species *y*) and retain its individual identity (CC vi, 6). (If I understand her correctly, Conway actually says “will,” but this is needlessly too strong for our purposes.)

It follows then that at some point in my past, I could have been a horse and therefore (assuming that *Gulliver's Travels* is but a fiction) not a person. Moreover, it seems also possible that in the future I will cease to be a person. Nowhere does Conway rule this out. Hence, for Conway I am not essentially a person. In other words, personhood is like fatherhood in the sense that none of us began as fathers, but personhood is not like fatherhood in the sense that once a father, one will always be a father. So, according to Conway, *person* is a phase-concept, not a substance-concept. Neither is person a permanent phase-concept.

3. Locke on the Self

Conway speaks of a kind of transformation at death, from one kind of spiritual body to another depending on what that body deserves. In the strict sense then, at death individuals do not die; rather, they are reincarnated or resurrected. Yet at death individuals go through a period of spiritual darkness or obscurity, where consciousness lapses. And so during this time I am not a person. But it is not as if *I* cease to exist during this period. I have one beginning of existence. I begin at the beginning of time,³ and never cease from that point on, though I may cease to be a person.

Locke, too, seems to think that person is a phase-concept, but for reasons foreign to Conway. Yes, like Conway, Locke wants to ground a view of the person that is consistent with the dead “rising again” and immortality. And yes, like Conway, Locke believes that I have one beginning of existence. However, unlike Conway, Locke holds that I have no essence at all.⁴ This needs some explanation.

Take this simple history of a Lockean self: I am person A from the time of consciousness t_1 till time t_2 ($t_1 < t_2$). Say that person A ceases to exist at t_2 . At death, there is no unity of consciousness, no continuing history of consciousness, no conscious being. Locke defines *person* as “a thinking, intelligent Being that has reason and reflection and can consider itself as itself, the same thinking thing in different times and places” (E II, 27, §9). Now say that at time t_3 ($t_3 > t_2$) resurrection occurs (brought about by God) and a person B comes into existence. Is person A (who existed from t_1 to t_2) numerically identical with person B (from t_3 on)? Yes, for otherwise person A would not have been properly resurrected.

The important question is this: Did *I* continue to exist between t_2 and t_3 where there was neither person A nor person B? Did *I* continue to exist without