

Does Leibniz's Metaphysics Surpass Descartes'?

By Jason M. Gross

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In *Discourse on Metaphysics* and in letters to fellow philosophers Burchard de Volder and Antoine Arnauld, G.W. Leibniz criticizes Descartes' view of a homogenous and shapeless matter as being irreconcilable with the variation in appearances we sense. In arguing against the Cartesian view of matter, Leibniz, in the process, lays the groundwork for a new vision of reality. Leibniz adopts three main arguments against the Cartesian conception of matter. The first relates to the question of matter's composition. Cartesians see matter purely in terms of extension, meaning it derives its reality from the reality of the beings or parts of which it is composed. However, Leibniz maintains that where there are only beings by aggregation, there are not any real beings, since the parts that comprise an aggregate can always be broken down further. Furthermore, what constitutes the essence of a being by aggregation is "only a mode of the things of which it is composed" (261). There is no accounting of composition or reality in Descartes' theory of matter. The second criticism Leibniz makes is that Descartes does not propose any distinguishing criterion or individuation for matter, as if we were to imagine two perfect and concentric spheres, unable to even define the boundaries of the spheres. Defining matter as pure extension destroys all the variety in the "greatness and beauty of the works of God" (262). In his letter to de Volder, Leibniz posits a *reductio ad absurdum* argument, indicating that if one assumes matter is passive and motion is simply successive existence at different points in time, he would absurdly conclude that two different substances are identical, since there is no way to distinguish them within the Cartesian framework. The final prong of Leibniz's

critique of Descartes involves one of his own areas of expertise: physics. He deduced that while the same force is always conserved in the universe, the quantity of motion does not remain constant. The quantity of motion is defined by the speed multiplied by the size of the moving body. The significance is that the Cartesians, based on an incomplete understanding of physics, considered motion but only from the standpoint of external movements of bodies. However, when several bodies change position among themselves, it is impossible to determine which ones moved or were at rest all along, meaning this definition of motion was not an entirely real concept. Since the quantity of force, which relates to the size of bodies or extension, differs from the quantity of motion, it proves that there is something else beyond (or as it turns out, in lieu of, according to Leibniz) extension that explains the phenomena of bodies. Leibniz argues that the force that causes the movements of bodies is something real, enabling one to distinguish between them. Overall, Leibniz's arguments weaken Descartes' conception of matter, significantly. Descartes did not have a total understanding of the latest in physics, preventing him from formulating a more in-depth metaphysical vision. There is logic in Leibniz's criticisms, which lead to a more rigorous analysis of and ultimately an imaginative vision of the world.

To understand Leibniz's conception of extended reality, one must turn to how he defines real substances. The answer is true unities – entities that cannot be divided any further. Everything else is in the category of phenomena, abstractions, or relations. Thus, bodies, which are aggregates, are “beings of reason, or rather, of imagination” (Letter to de Volder). Even at this phenomenalist level of reality, which defines bodies as collections of ideas, there is order to the soul's perceptions, such that living bodies are natural machines, made up of smaller machines, to infinity. Ultimately, however, these aggregates are made

up of simple substances, which have no parts and no extension. These simple substances, or monads as Leibniz calls them, are “perpetual living mirrors of the universe,” with each monad expressing a different point of view, and containing a “plurality of properties and relations” (280, 276). These properties include a perceptive power as well as the cause of the aforementioned motion in the universe – appetition, or “the action of the internal principle which brings about the change or passage from one perception to another” (276). By constructing bodies out of monads, Leibniz establishes himself as a semi-mentalistic, synthesizing the phenomenalist and realist schools of thought, while developing a blueprint for real bodies forged by ideas and perceptions. Realism advocates for the position that aggregates are real and mind-independent. Semi-mentalistic is the view that aggregates are neither entirely mental nor mind-independent. Leibniz compares solid bodies to shifting sands with nothing to bind them, or ponds full of fish, without being able to discern the fish themselves. For Leibniz, bodies are both mental representations of relations, effectively abstractions, and at the same time, aggregates.

Within Leibniz’s conception of extended reality, there is also discussion concerning the harmony between souls (monads) and bodies, as they are all representations of a single universe. Incorporating the law of nature, Leibniz corrects Descartes who thought that souls could change the direction of bodies, which is impossible since there is a “conservation of the same total direction in matter” (282). It is Leibniz’s vision of a pre-established harmony, which is consistent with the laws of physics.

More generally, when comparing the Cartesian and Leibnizian views of extended reality, I believe it is the latter which is more plausible. First, Leibniz’s pluralistic vision of an infinite number of monads captures the differentiation across individuals, while

Descartes' homogenous concept of matter does not. Second, Leibniz provides a more rigorous definition of true substance, one that is indivisible, and a compelling argument that what one sees as aggregates are mere constructions in his own mind. Third, while Descartes' dualism of mind and body whereby there is a causal relation between the two may seem more intuitive than Leibniz's concept of pre-established harmony, in which there are no causal relations, it is difficult to know with certainty the biological basis for Descartes' claims, which may be nothing more than enlightened conjectures. The mind and body are dissimilar, giving one reason to doubt the Cartesian cause-effect relationship between the two.

Works Cited

1. Ariew, Roger, and Eric Watkins. *Modern Philosophy: An Anthology*. Indianapolis: Hackett, 1998. Print.
2. Letter to de Volder by G.W. Leibniz. Dated 1704 or 1705.