

Chapter 13

The Philosophy of Gottfried Wilhelm von Leibniz

Key Words: monad, monadology, pre-established harmony, force, metaphysical point, windowless, queen monad.

Introduction

Leibniz's (July 1646 – November 1716) philosophy is unique for many reasons. He is the third among the three great rationalists who have immensely contributed to the development of Modern philosophy. His Monadology attempts to solve some of the problems the concept of substance has generated in the Rationalist school and it also tries to solve the problem of mind-body dualism. He provides a very innovative account of the idea of God with his idea of pre-established harmony.

Leibniz who was primarily known as an outstanding mathematician was born in July 1, 1646, in Leipzig. His early education was in Germany in a neo-Scholastic Aristotelian philosophy. When he went to Paris he was introduced to Cartesianism and the materialism of Gassendi. In 1676 he met Spinoza and had discussions. Though this incident was very important in his career, he refused to admit the influence of Spinoza on his work.

Overview of Leibniz's Philosophy

Like both of his predecessors, Descartes and Spinoza, Leibniz too began his philosophical contemplations with the problem of Substance. Different accounts of mind-body relationship and the number of substances were prevalent during that time, though none of them could satisfactorily solve the problem.

One issue with which his philosophy was dominantly preoccupied with was the concept of harmony. He introduces the concept of God in this context and conceives the latter as a being who is responsible for the harmony exhibited by the universe. In other words, he advocates the notion of pre-established harmony, a harmony that has been instituted by God in the beginning. Leibniz thus tries to reconcile the speculative theology of the Scholastic thinkers with the rational modern philosophy and science of his age. He believed that the universe is a harmonious whole which is governed by mathematical and logical principles.

With regard to the number of Substances, he adopts a different position from both Descartes and Spinoza. Descartes, as we have seen in an early chapter, had postulated God as the only true Substance and conceived mind and body as dependent substances. The division between mind and body was maintained by virtue of their attributes; thinking and extension respectively. Spinoza on the other hand affirmed that there is only one substance which is infinite in itself and which possesses infinite attributes. He thus attempts to reunite the body and mind which were separated by Descartes, which generated many conceptual issues in the intellectual history of the West.

Leibniz accepted Descartes' mechanistic explanation of the physical world, which explained the independent functioning of the physical universe. Such a philosophical perspective was advantageous for an emerging modern science that was seeking an account of the functioning of the physical universe, independent of the psychic or spiritual principles. But at the same time he found the embedded dualism in the Cartesian philosophy as inherently problematic. On the other hand, he was also unhappy with Spinoza who does not recognize the reality of individuals. He criticized Spinoza for rejecting teleology or purpose, as for Leibniz working for ends is important in practical life. Again he held that to conceive Substance as both extended and unextended, as Spinoza did is a contradiction.

Leibniz's major point of departure from Descartes happens when he discusses the notion of extension, which is conceived as an attribute of the material substance by Descartes and of God by Spinoza. Descartes conceives matter as extended substance and as inherently passive and inert and hence as receiving motion from without. Leibniz, on the other hand holds that, extension is not an attribute of Substance, as it involves plurality and hence only belong to an aggregate of substances. Descartes held that the quantity of motion in the universe is constant. Leibniz questions this and wonders what happens when bodies come to rest and bodies begin to move. We cannot hold that motion seems to be lost and gained on such occasions, as it would then violates the principle of continuity, which holds that nature makes no leaps. He thus argues that, there should be a ground of motion, which is force, or *conatus*. Force, according to him, is the tendency of the body to move or to continue its motion.

Leibniz thus maintains that every substance is an expression of force. He thus equates body or matter with an unextended center of force. Hence for him matter is not just a mere passive lump of extended substance, but is force. It does not exist by virtue of extension, but extension exists by virtue of body or force. Extension is the phenomenal way in which matter

appears to us. It is not the attribute of matter. It is force which is the essential attribute of matter.

He thus affirms that there are an infinite number of substances, each is single and unextended. This affirms his conviction that a true indivisible unit must be unextended, as nothing substantial or primary principle is made up of parts. Every primary principle must be a simple, indivisible reality. While according to Descartes the existence of bodies presupposes extension, Leibniz held that extension presupposes the existence of bodies or forces. Here we may need to understand what he means by a force.

The Concept of Force and Monadology

Leibniz holds that force is the source or foundation of the mechanical world as it is the ground of extension of the body. The idea of extension presupposes that in the body there is an aspect that extends itself. It is the nature of the body to spread itself out, and to continue itself. Force is the property owing to which that body appears as limited, or as matter.

Leibniz maintains that every unit of force is an indivisible union of soul and matter. It is a union of activity and passivity. It is an organizing, self-determining, purposive force, which limits itself and which possesses the power of resistance. Leibniz further affirms a pluralism, as there is a plurality of forces. There is an infinite number of forces or particular individual substances, each being a dynamic unit independent of others. Each unit is immaterial, unextended and simple. With regard to the nature of these units, Leibniz holds a very peculiar view. Each of them is an independent substance and is a union of matter and soul. In this sense Leibniz's pluralism of substances which resemble atomism distinguishes itself from the latter. Each substance, according to him, is a metaphysical point and not a physical or mathematical unit. The human body is nothing but a plurality of such simple forces and the human soul is also such a metaphysical point. This is Leibniz's solution to the mind-body problem.

Each monad, according to him, is a union of matter and soul, but is predominantly a spiritual or psychic force. What is true for one monad is true for all, as the same principle that expresses itself in the mind of man is active in body, plant, and animal. He thus asserts that all matter is animate. Leibniz's monadology opposes the traditional notion that equates mind with consciousness and holds that matter is essentially unconscious and is separated from the former. He thus goes against the fundamental Cartesian assumption which affirms thinking as

an exclusive attribute of mind. The mind according to him consists of perceptions and tendencies.

Leibniz maintains that each monad perceives the universe from its peculiar perspective and every monad has the power of perception or representation. There are clear and obscure perceptions as clearness and distinctness in different monads. Every monad perceives or represents and expresses the entire universe. In this sense each one of them is a world in miniature, a microcosm and a living mirror of the entire universe. Hence every monad feels everything that occurs in the entire universe. Each reflects and represents the entire universe from its unique perspective in its own way and this feature is the basis of the difference between them. The difference is in terms of degrees of clearness. Since the perspective of each monad is limited and no two monads mirror the universe in the same manner, they form a hierarchy.

Those monads which represent the universe with more and more clarity are on the top of the hierarchy. They are arranged from the lowest to the highest monad in terms of the clearness of consciousness. This is visible in nature where there is a hierarchy from plants, to animals to man; a hierarchy of monads. Leibniz asserts that nature makes no lapses and there is a continuous line of differences in clarity from the dullest piece of ignorant matter to God, which is the highest monad. God, according to Leibniz, is the highest monad, which is perfect and is pure activity.

Another important feature of the monads is that each of them is windowless. Each is windowless and a homogenous unit. Hence a monad is not determined from without and everything it is to be is potential or implicit in it. This is the principle of continuity. Nothing can enter inside it from without and nothing can be in the monad which has not always been there. Nothing can ever come into it that is not in it now. This windowlessness makes each monad an independent and autonomous unit, unconnected and uninfluenced by others.

According to Leibniz, the entire universe is constituted of an infinite number of such monads, or individual existences, which are spiritual entities. They resemble the atoms of Democritus, as the latter are also infinite in number and homogenous. But the monads are different, as unlike the atoms, they are not material, but metaphysical. They are eternal like Plato's ideas, but are not outside of things as Plato proposed and are in things as proposed by Aristotle.

Leibniz further contends that, monads are in a process of evolution and in this process each monad realizes its nature. This process is controlled with an inner necessity and not externally, as they are independent and windowless. Each monad passes through a series of stages of evolution and each stage consists in an unfolding of what is implicit in it. Since monad is windowless, nothing in the monad is lost in this process of evolution and nothing new is gained as well. Everything that was there was preserved in the later stages and future stages are predetermined in the earlier ones. This is called the doctrine of preformation or the incasement theory. Leibniz thus says that every monad is charged with the past and is big with the future.

The entire universe is constitutive of these monads, including the organic and inorganic bodies. Leibniz maintains that in organisms there is a central monad or a Queen Monad, which is a soul. The central monad represents the picture of the entire body and it is the guiding principle of the monads surrounding it. On the other hand, the inorganic bodies are not centralized with a queen monad and they consist of a mere mass or aggregation of monads. There is no union of monads in inorganic bodies.

The mind—body problem is addressed by Leibniz in this context. He rules out interactionism as monads are windowless and are not acted upon from without. Nor can there be any causal interaction; as such possibility will violate the principle of autonomy of monads. He thus suggests that the harmony between mind and body is by God. This notion of pre-established harmony is employed in order to explain the relationship between the mental and the physical realms. God arranged the minds and bodies from the very beginning in such a way that they shall go together. The soul and body are in a relation of harmony, which is pre-established by God.

This harmony ensures a parallelism or concomitance between the mental and physical states. The body is the material expression of the soul, as corresponding to force in matter there is conscious activity, or will. The souls act according to the laws of final causes, by means of desire, ends, and means, which are psychic and the bodies act according to the laws of efficient causes or motions, which are mechanical.

Leibniz's picture of the universe thus exhibits an organic unity. As in an organism each part has its function, each monad functions in the universe to form the reality. Each has its specific function to perform and all monads act together like the parts of an organism. Every

state in a monad is the effect of the preceding state in it and each state acts in unison with the states of all the other monads due to pre-established harmony. This would also explain the reason why and how the universe exhibits an order. The universe exhibits an order and uniformity, as everything in nature can be mechanically explained. There is a causal order between things in the world and the universe functions like a causal chain, where everything is causally related. But this idea of causality too is peculiar. Monadology rejects the idea of external cause as there cannot be any cause from without, thanks to the windowlessness of monads. Hence, causation means concomitant changes. It only means a harmonious action of the parts, which is due to pre-established harmony established by God. The order exhibited in the Universe owes to this pre-established harmony instituted by god. God has arranged monads in such a way that they work without any external interference, neither from other monads nor even from God. The order and design in the universe presupposes a higher reason and God is the ultimate cause of all occurrences. Hence the source of mechanics lies in metaphysics. The metaphor of multiple clocks showing the same time is cited here. Since all the clocks keep time with each other without any causal interaction, there must have been a single outside Cause that regulated all of them.

With this idea of pre-established harmony, Leibniz reconciles Mechanism and Teleology and materializes a harmony of religion and reason. It is also a harmony between the physical kingdom of nature and the moral kingdom of grace. He maintains that the universal principles of physics and mechanics presuppose a divine purpose. They are not like laws of logic or mathematics as their existence depends on utility. He affirms that their ground is the wisdom of God. God has chosen them as ways of realizing his purpose.

The souls, according to him, are the copies of God and hence are little divinities in their own departments. Man's reason is like God's reason in kind, though differing from it in degree. Man's purpose agrees with God's. There is a harmony between man's reason and God's reason, between man's purpose and God's purpose, Between physical kingdom and the kingdom of grace, between God the builder of the machine of the universe and God the monarch of the divine spiritual state.

God is the highest monad, the monad of monads. Leibniz holds that the principle of continuity demands a highest monad at the end of the series of forces. He is the cause of the monads. The order and harmony of nature call for a harmonizer and the eternal and necessary truths like the truths of logic and geometry presuppose an eternal intellect in which to exist.

He further states that, while being an individual monad or a person, God also transcends all monads. He is the supernatural and superrational monad. God is the most perfect and most real being and hence He undergoes no changes or evolution. He possesses perfect knowledge as he sees all things at a glance and He is the ultimate Harmonizer. Returning to the clock metaphor, since all the clocks keep time with each other without any causal interaction, there must be a single outside Cause that regulated all of them who is God. Hence the concept of God is a central concept in Leibniz's philosophy.

Quiz

1. What is a substance according to Leibniz?
(a) a homogenous entity (b) An expression of force (c) both extended and thinking entity (d) essentially unextended.
2. What according to Leibniz is a unit of force?
(a) A pure soul (b) A material atom (c) An indivisible union of soul and matter (d) Neither soul nor matter.
3. Which of the following does not describe a force?
(a) Immaterial (b) Unextended (c) Independent of others (d) Complex aggregate.
4. Which of the following is not true of monads?
(a) All monads represent the universe in the same manner (b) Monads form a hierarchy (c) Every monad perceives or represents and expresses the entire universe (d) Each monad is windowless.
5. What was Leibniz's solution to the mind-body dualism?
(a) Interactionism (b) Psycho-physical parallelism (c) Occasionalism (d) Pre-established harmony.

Answer Key

1. (b)
2. (c)
3. (d)
4. (a)
5. (d)

Assignments

1. Explain Leibniz's monadology.
2. Discuss the concept of pre-established harmony.
3. Explain the role of God in Leibniz's system of philosophy.

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