**Monadology** – G.W. Leibniz

The Monodology is a short (ten page) collection of ninety short statements (ranging from a sentence to a paragraph in length) that establish the basis of Leibniz’s metaphysics. The following represent brief summaries of the points covered in this text.

Monads (1)

The *Monad* is a ‘simple substance’, by which Leibniz means something ‘without parts’, as opposed to a ‘compound substance’, which is therefore composed of Monads.

Since Monads are not composed of parts they can neither come into being nor be dissolved by natural means. They can only “come into being or come to an end all at once”, that is, by creation or annihilation.

Since Monads have no parts which could change or move around, nothing external can influence or affect them in any way. Leibniz expresses this idea by saying that Monads have “no windows”.

Every Monad is different from every other Monad. Leibniz justifies this by saying that “in nature there are never two beings which are perfectly alike”. It follows then that compound substances are also distinct from each other. Since compound substances are only made up of simple substances, if no simple substances differed in quality, then, by extension, no compound substances would differ in quality (being just the sum of heir constituent simple substances) and everything would be indistinguishable from everything else.

Every Monad is subject to continual change, but considering Leibniz’s earlier point that things external to it cannot influence it in any way, the changes that take place in a Monad must derive from some “internal principle”. These changes should involve some kind of multiplicity since in every change, something changes while something else remains unchanged, so Leibniz says “a simple substance must be affected and related in many ways, although it has no parts.” This change is what Leibniz calls *Perception*. The active force in the Monad which produces this change from one perception to another is called *Appetition* (this is something like ‘will’).

Leibniz gives the name Monads or *Entelechies* to simple substances which have perception only; as opposed to *Souls* which have perception accompanied by memory.

Rational Souls

Memory gives soul a sense of continuity which resembles reason but is not. The fact that animals can be trained to react in a certain way to specific stimuli proves that this faculty is different from reason. Most of the time (around 75% according to Leibniz) human perceptions are connected by memory alone, at which time we act like animals.

It is the knowledge of “necessary and eternal truths” which distinguishes us from animals and gives us Reason and the capacity for “acts of reflexion”, i.e. contemplating ourselves. Leibniz calls the Monad which possesses this knowledge, a *rational soul* or *mind*.

He also holds that eternal truths are necessary, as opposed to being arbitrary and dependent on God’s Will. Rather, they depend on God’s “understanding and are its inner object”, thus, necessary, like God.

There are two principles which ground our reasonings:

1. Principle of Contradiction: Anything that involves a contradiction is false and anything opposed to a contradictory proposition is true.
2. Principle of Sufficient Reason: There can be no fact or true statement without a sufficient reason explaining why it is thus, although the reason will often be unknown by us.

Leibniz also distinguishes between two types of truths:

1. Truths of reasoning: These truths are necessary and their opposite is impossible.
2. Truths of fact: These truths are contingent and their opposite is possible.

“Souls act according to the laws of *final causes* through appetitions, ends, and means” [italics added] as opposed to laws of *efficient causes* which apply to bodies. This just means that, for souls, effects follow from causes which are motivated by final aims or desires.

Leibniz believes that animal souls and rational souls are the same except that in rational animals “their spermatic animalcules… [can when ‘chosen, so to speak’] attain to human nature through an actual conception” at which point they become minds.

He also mentions another difference; while souls are living mirrors only of the universe of created things, minds are also images of God, and in this sense they are “capable of knowing the system of the universe”.

Cause-effect

Every present state of a simple substance is a consequence of its preceding state and the same is true of perceptions and motions. Leibniz calls the causes that being about change in motion (as in bodies or physical things), *efficient causes*; and the causes that result in specific acts (of a soul), *final causes*.

God

Leibniz offers two proofs for the existence of God:

1. *A posteriori* proof (cosmological argument): There are an infinite number of past forms and motions which make up the efficient cause of any present act and an infinite number of tendencies and dispositions of the soul which make up its final cause. Since each step back to an earlier cause gets us no closer to a sufficient reason for either, the sufficient reason must lie outside the sequence of contingent things. This substance must therefore be necessary; and this we call God.

Some implications follow from this. First, since this substance (God) is a sufficient reason for every contingent thing, there is only one God. Second, since God is the common factor in every particular thing, nothing is independent of Him, i.e. He is universal. Third, since God contains all possibilities within Himself, He must be free from limits, that is, absolutely infinite. Fourth, He must therefore contain as much reality as is possible. Fifth, since perfection is “nothing but amount of positive reality”, God must be absolutely perfect.

1. *A priori* (ontological argument): God is not only the source of all existences, but also of all essences in so far as they are real; by which Leibniz means, “the source of what is real in the possible.” A thing’s ‘essence’ is its innermost nature, that which makes the thing what it is, but this essence need not actually exist, even as a possibility. Essences therefore exist only because of God (who is the source of them presumably because he thinks of them).

The implication of this is that “without [God] there would be nothing real in the possibilities of things, and not only would there be nothing in existence, but nothing would even be possible.” For there to be any reality in essences or possibilities (eternal truths), this reality must be founded in something existing and actual, i.e. the necessary Being, “in whom essence involves existence, or in whom to be possible is to be actual.” The bottom line? If God is possible, then He must necessarily exist.

In God there is:

* Power, by which God produces everything
* Knowledge, whose content is the variety of the ideas
* Will, which makes changes according to the principle of the best

Leibniz calls the total assembly of spirits the City of God and claims that it is a “truly universal monarchy, [and] a moral world in the natural world.”

Pre-established Harmony

Created things *act* in so far as they are ‘perfect’ and *suffer* (or are passive) in relation to another, in so far as they are ‘imperfect.’ Here, ‘perfection’ means the extent to which we can explain *a priori* from one created thing what takes place in another created thing. The more perfect thing is the one from which we can explain the other. In addition, since Leibniz connects perfection and perception, activity (perfection) derives from ‘distinct perceptions’ and passivity (imperfection) follows from confused perceptions.

But Monads cannot directly affect each other (they are ‘windowless’) therefore it is only “through the mediation of God” that one Monad can influence another.

We can also see that among created things, “activities and passivities are mutual”, e.g. X is both active and passive in relation to Y. It is active inasmuch as we can explain the changes that happen in Y from a consideration of X alone, and passive in so far as we can explain X’s actions from a distinct perception it had of something in Y. Of course, it is God which is responsible for adapting the one to the other.

Since these *acting* things are souls and the *suffering* things are bodies and both are able to influence each other through God’s mediation, Leibniz calls this his system of pre-established harmony between two realms in nature, the former (souls) being *final causes* and the latter (bodies) being *efficient causes*.

There is also another harmony at work, this one between “the physical realm of nature and the moral realm of grace… that is to say, between God, considered as Architect of the mechanism of the universe and God considered as Monarch of the divine City of spirits.” This means that God’s grace manifests in nature and vice versa, primarily through people’s sins and noble actions (in the moral realm) leading to physical consequences (in the physical realm), although Leibniz is quick to point out that “this cannot and ought not always to happen immediately.”

The Best Possible World

There are an infinite number of possible universes in the ideas of God but since only one can be actual there must be a sufficient reason why God would choose one rather than another. This reason must lie in the “fitness, or in the degrees of perfection that these worlds possess”, hence, this world must be the best possible one.

In addition, since all created things are connected (or adapted) to each other by God, then each Monad “has relations which express all the others… consequently… it is a perpetual living mirror of the universe.” The fact that each Monad reflects the universe from a different perspective (like people all looking at the same town from different directions) allows there to be as “great variety as possible, along with the greatest order [since the universe is ruled according to perfect order and each Monad is a mirror of the universe], that is to say, it is the way to get as much perfection as possible [since more order is more perfect]”.

Monads (2)

Since all Monads are created things, they cannot exist without limits or else they would be Gods.

It is the nature of Monads to represent (reflect the universe) but most of these representations will be confused and only a few things, those near to or with a strong relation to the Monad, will be represented distinctly.

Central to Leibniz’s thought is the idea that “all is a plenum”, by which he probably means that all of space is filled with matter and so, through the rules of cause and effect, “every motion has an effect upon distant bodies in proportion to their distance… [in other words] everybody feels the effect of all that takes place in the universe, so that he who sees all might read in each what is happening everywhere, and even what has happened or shall happen”. However, the complexity of this ‘plenum’ is infinite and so no soul can acquire any distinct idea of it.

Since no Monad can be destroyed, each soul is also indestructible. In addition to this, the animal itself cannot be destroyed although “its mechanism [i.e. body] may often perish in part and take off or put on an organic slough”.

The Body

Since the body is the closest thing to each Monad, it is also the thing each Monad can have the most distinct representations of.

Since each Monad is a mirror of the universe and the universe is ruled according to a perfect order, there must also be order in that which represents it, i.e. the soul. And since the soul acquires its perceptions through the body, the body must also be perfectly ordered.

In fact, each body is a “kind of divine machine or natural automaton, which infinitely surpasses all artificial automata.” This is true because a machine made by human hands is composed of individual parts which are not machines in themselves, i.e. which are just inert objects. On the other hand, “the machines of nature, namely, living bodies” are machines all the way down to the simple substances which make them up, namely, Monads.

“Bodies act according to the laws of *efficient causes* or motions” [italics added] as opposed to laws of *final causes* which apply to souls. This just means that, for bodies, effects follow from causes related to motion and physical influence.

On Descartes

Leibniz points out that Descartes completely ignored perceptions of which we are not consciously aware, meaning that he “failed to distinguish between a prolonged unconsciousness and absolute death” and this allowed him to fall into the mistake that souls are separate from bodies.

Descartes thought that since eternal truths depend on God they are arbitrary, depending only on his Will, but Leibniz disagrees with this. Only contingent truths arise from will. Leibniz holds that necessary truths depend on God’s “understanding and are its inner object”, thus, necessary, like God.

Because Descartes knew about the conservation of energy (Leibniz calls it ‘force’) he understood that the soul could not impart any force to bodies (because then a force would suddenly be appearing in the universe from nothing), and this led him to believe that the “soul could change the direction of bodies”. However, he didn’t know that the *direction* of movement in a system must also be conserved (conservation of momentum). This forbids Descartes’ theory about the soul affecting the body by changing its direction. Leibniz claims Descartes would have come upon his own system of pre-established harmony if he had known of this.

Conclusion

Leibniz concludes *The Monadology* by saying that “wise and virtuous people” endeavour to act according to the will of God but also remain “content with what God actually brings to pass by His secret, consequent and positive will”. They ought to attach themselves to God in this way because only God, as the efficient cause of our being and the final cause of our actions, can see the order that underlies the whole universe and knows that it is “impossible to make it better than it is”. This act of attaching ourselves to God is the only thing that can make us happy.