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Samuel Newlands

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From theism to idealism to monism: a Leibnizian road not taken

Samuel Newlands[1]

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Abstract This paper explores a PSR-connected trail leading from theistic idealism to a form of substance monism. In particular, I argue that the same style of argument available for a Leibnizian form of metaphysical idealism actually leads beyond idealism to something closer to Spinozistic monism. This path begins with a set of theological commitments about the nature and perfection of God that were widely shared among leading early modern philosophers. From these commitments, there arises an interesting case for metaphysical idealism, roughly the thesis that only minds and mind-dependent states actually exist. However, I contend, that same theistic reasoning also leads to an idealist form of substance monism, the view that God is the only actual substance and that almost everything else is merely an intentional object in God's mind.

Keywords Monism · Idealism · Leibniz · Perfection · Theism · Early modern

The Principle of Sufficient Reason (PSR) has been linked to a variety of esoteric views in metaphysics, including necessitarianism, the identity of indiscernibles, superessentialism, spacetime relationalism, the complete concept theory of substances, the rejection of extrinsic relations, and so on. Readers are presumably aware of such associations, and a willingness to keep reading suggests at least some tolerance for metaphysical wildness. If so, it may come as good news that this paper explores another PSR trail through the metaphysical backwoods, this time a path from *theistic idealism* to *substance monism*. In particular, I will claim that the same style of argument that might be offered for a Leibnizian form of metaphysical

✉ Samuel Newlands
snewlands@nd.edu

[1] University of Notre Dame, Notre Dame, USA

idealism actually leads beyond idealism to something closer to Spinozistic monism.[1]

Our road begins with a set of theological commitments about the nature and perfection of God that were widely shared among leading early modern philosophers. From these commitments, there arises an interesting case for *metaphysical idealism*, roughly the thesis that only minds and mind-dependent states actually exist. However, I will argue, that same theistic reasoning also leads to an idealist form of substance monism, the view that God is the only actual substance and that almost everything else is merely an intentional object in God's mind.

The PSR will play a role in this wild ride, though it will not work alone. This is exactly right, I think: while the PSR does substantive work in these metaphysical systems, it should not be treated as the sole principle from which all conclusions can be derived. As we will see, there are other substantive metaphysical principles at work that are not themselves mere consequences of the PSR, though they interact elegantly with the PSR.

1 The metaphysics of perfection

The first few steps involve the nature of God and a metaphysical account of perfection. One might, of course, want to challenge some or all of the theistic claims in this section, but my focus will be on their apparent implications for the nature and structure of the actual world.

1.1 God's perfection

The existence of a perfect being, God, is one of the most central and widespread commitments in early modern metaphysics. Despite its popularity, showing how God's perfection was consistent with one's preferred metaphysics turned out to be tricky. As Leibniz warns, "The most widely accepted and meaningful notion we have of God is expressed well enough in these words, that God is an absolutely perfect being; yet the consequences of these words are not sufficiently considered" (1686; PE 35).

Indeed, a very popular way to discredit a rival view in metaphysics was to argue that it would render God imperfect, which was taken by all parties to be an obvious *reductio*. Descartes levels the charge of rendering God imperfect against Gassendi (1641; CSM II/255).[2] Conway levels it against Hobbes (1692, p. 64). Leibniz objects in a similar vein to Descartes and Malebranche (1686; PE 36–37). Clarke

[1] It will not be exactly Spinoza's form of monism for many reasons, the most important being that it denies that extension is a fundamental attribute of God. There is a long history of suspecting that Leibniz doth protest too much against various Spinozistic conclusions, including substance monism. For previous discussions of somewhat related pressures towards Spinozistic monism in Leibniz, see Adams (1994, pp. 123–134), Kulstad (1994), and Mercer (2001, p. 453–55). Cover and O'Leary-Hawthorne (1999, p. 253–289) suggest that Leibniz's views on harmony might actually help him avoid one strand of monistic pressure, whereas I will suggest that Leibniz's account of harmony actually *increases* the pressure towards monism.

raises it against Leibniz (1716; LC 20), and Leibniz fires it right back at Clarke (1716; LC 24). Le Clerc against Bayle, and Bayle against Jacquelot.[3] Arnauld and Spinoza against Descartes (1641; CSM II/148–9 and 1677; Ip33s2), and nearly everyone invokes it against Spinoza.[4]

Even so, there were a few general, stable commitments about God's perfection that will be relevant in what follows. One widely accepted implication of God's perfection is a thesis about dependence, which I will state very loosely to keep it acceptable to differing stripes of theists:

> **Creaturely Dependence (CD)**: Everything (besides God) metaphysically depends on God.[5]

Contemporary construals of divine dependence are often causal, such as the thesis that every existing concrete object (besides God) casually depends on God as a "first cause." But historically, creaturely dependence was taken to be both more extensive and intensive than this. Extensively, the scope of CD ranged over more than just actually existing individuals. The *properties* of actual things and whatever was real (if anything) in merely *possible* individuals and properties also depend on God.[6] So the domain of the quantifier in CD is supposed to be quite wide-ranging. Intensively, the form of dependence was not merely causal and, in the relevant cases, was not causal at all, which is what the handwavy "metaphysical" in CD is gesturing at.

In fact, a guiding rule of thumb for seventeenth century metaphysics was to make as much as dependent on God as possible without compromising other divine attributes, such as transcendence and goodness. Leibniz again: "My opinion is that it must be taken as certain that there is as much dependence of things on God as is possible without infringing on divine justice" (1686; MP 102).

There were different ways of unpacking this form of non-causal metaphysical dependence, such as through the old Platonic metaphor of *resemblance,* divine exemplar theory, or a less metaphorical account of ontological dependence. Setting aside the details, it was widely agreed that one especially promising way to satisfy

[2] See also a similar charge against the authors of the second set of objections (1641; CSM II/99) and Descartes' complaint to an unknown correspondent in 1642 (CSMK III/212).

[3] Bayle (1707) repeatedly states and responds to Le Clerc's charge in his *Dialogues of Maximus and Themistius*. Leibniz (1710; T 266) repeats Bayle's objection to Jacquelot from God's perfection, and then argues against it—as well as against what Leibniz describes as the same objection by Arnauld against Malebranche!

[4] This is true even proleptically of Descartes (1644; CSM I/200–201).

[5] See, for example, Leibniz 1710; G VI/439. God's self-dependence was seen as more or less problematic, depending on the kind of dependence involved. The notion of self-causation was widely regarded as incoherent (e.g., see Arnauld's objections to Descartes (1641; CSM II/148–50); for an exception, see Spinoza 1677; Id1), but self-grounding or self-explanation seemed less objectionable. Still, for present purposes, we can stipulate that metaphysical dependence is asymmetrical and irreflexive, in which case God is excluded from the scope of CD.

[6] For examples from familiar bookends, see Aquinas (1947; q1, art 1, reply) and Leibniz (1697; PE 152 and 1710; G VI/439). For more on the early modern debate about the dependence of possibilia and possibilities on God, see Newlands 2013.

CD was to ascribe a very tight relationship between God's features and all possible creaturely features, usually expressed in terms of *containment*. Such theists typically accepted something like DC:

> **Divine Containment (DC)**: God contains, in some way, every possible creaturely feature or way of being.

As Aquinas puts a (slightly weaker) version of DC, "All created perfections are in God. Hence he is spoken of as universally perfect, because he does not lack…any excellence which may be found in any genus" (1947; q4, art 2, reply). Descartes offers a similar principle as an axiom: "Whatever reality or perfection there is in a thing is present either formally or eminently in its first and adequate cause [i.e., God]" (1641; CSM II/116). Leibniz sometimes employs this language as well: "This simple primitive substance [i.e., God] must eminently include the perfections contained in the derivative substances which are its effects. Thus [God] will have perfect power, knowledge, and will" (1714; PE 210). Advocates of DC used a variety of terms (such as *perfections*, *realities*, *attributes*, *properties*, and *qualities*) interchangeably for what I neutrally label the "features" of things, but nothing in what follows turns on differences among these categories.

Leibniz offers different ways of unpacking DC, some more promising than others. He sometimes claims that all possible creaturely attributes are just limited versions of God's own attributes and every possible creaturely essence is just a distinctive combination of limited versions of God's actual, purely positive and unlimited attributes. "But in God, those attributes are absolutely infinite or perfect, while in the created monads…they are only imitations of it in proportion to the perfection that they have" (1714; PE 219).[7] At the very least, this version of DC applies to *fundamental* ways of being a thing, ways of being that cannot be reduced to or constructed out of combinations of other properties.

But identifying all possible fundamental attributes with God's actual attributes immediately generates pressure towards one form of Spinozism, according to which God actually exemplifies every possible fundamental attribute, including extension or materiality. The most common way of trying to block the inference from finite things being extended to God's being extended was to claim, again with DC, that God contains all possible fundamental attributes *in some way or other*, and then argue that God contains extension only "eminently," which is a form of containment that does not involve "formal" or direct exemplification. I have argued elsewhere (Newlands 2016) that the formal/eminent distinction names a problem rather than solves it, but we can set this issue aside here, since our focus will be on metaphysical *idealists* who can block this inference by denying that being extended is a fundamental attribute in the first place.

Leibniz sometimes suggests a different way to maintain DC without expanding God's nature or reducing the range of possible fundamental attributes. According to this account, God contains all possible creaturely properties by *representing* them.

[7] For even more Platonic-sounding versions, see Leibniz (1690(?); L 367) and (1710; T 51). Leibniz's doctrine of creaturely composition grew out of his early work on the ontological argument, and it plays an important role in his account of the metaphysical origins of evil; for more, see Newlands (2014).

In this spirit, Leibniz describes possible creaturely essences as the "internal objects" of God's ideas, a point about the intellectual grounds of possibility that Leibniz champions against voluntarist rivals.[8] In choosing which possible individuals and world to create, God surveys the content of God's own ideas, and Leibniz argues repeatedly that God must have complete and fully determinate representations of possibility space prior to creating anything if God is going to act in the wisest, most reasonable, and hence most morally perfect manner.[9]

Moreover, Leibniz claims that God represents and even entertains all the partial, perspectival representations of every possible finite mind. "For God, so to speak, turns on all sides and in all ways the general system of phenomena…and he views [*regardant*] all the faces of the world in all ways possible, since there is no relation that escapes his omniscience" (1686; PE 46–7). Leibniz adds a few lines later, "And God alone (from whom all individuals emanate continually and *who sees the universe not only as they see it* but also entirely differently from all of them)" (emphasis mine). In a later text, Leibniz explains, "God certainly sees things exactly as they are according to geometrical truth, although likewise he also knows how each thing appears to every other, and thus he contains in himself eminently all the other appearances" (1712(?); LDB 233). In the next sentence, Leibniz adds that "God not only regards [*spectat*] single monads and the modifications of any monad whatsoever, but he also sees [*videt*] their relations".

In other words, prior to creation, God contains and entertains every possible limited representational perspective that each possible finite mind could have. God is omnisubjective in the strong sense that God "sees" (*voit*) from not only every perspective of every actually existing mind, but also sees from every possible perspective of every possible perceiver. Presumably, Leibniz thinks this because he believes that (a) the partial perspectives of perceivers contribute to the overall value of the possible world in which they are included and (b) God evaluates the overall value of such worlds partly by "seeing" the world from each partial perspective. As Leibniz puts it more generally, "The wisdom of God, not content with embracing all the possibles, penetrates them, compares them, weighs them one against the other to estimate their degrees of perfection or imperfection…" (1710; T 267).

However, by seeing limited and perspectival representations, God does not thereby become imperfect. That's the advantage that the representational version of DC is supposed to have, a kind of perfection firewall: God can represent various limitations and imperfections, even "from within," without thereby actually becoming limited or imperfect. This may be why Leibniz emphasizes in these passages that God *also* sees the world from a distinct and non-partial vantage point as well. Perhaps whatever imperfections and non-divine affects (like fear and uncertainty) accrue to finite minds in virtue of entertaining limited perspectives do not accrue to God's mind in virtue of the presence of God's additional, "complete" perspective.[10]

[8] For more details and textual support, see Newlands (2013).

[9] For but one of many passages, see Leibniz 1710; T 267–8.

This version of DC has an important implication for God's creation of the world. Whatever new gets added in creation, it is not at the level of representations or perspectives. That is:

> **No New Perspectives (NNP)**: Creation does not add any representations, including perspectives, that God does not already have.

Such is the fate of being a dependent, image bearer of God: we are wholly derivative things, as DC and NNP try to capture.

Before moving on, we might wonder about the general motivation behind NNP and DC. I claimed they rested on CD and the nature of God's perfection, but perhaps the PSR is at work here instead. Certainly two intuitions that were explicitly voiced in support of DC are PSR-related. Descartes (1641; CSM II/28–29) supports DC with the familiar causal intuition *ex nihilo nihil fit*, and Leibniz (Leibniz 1714; PE 218) appeals to an actualist grounding demand (plus an intuition that it is metaphysically possible that nothing contingent exists). Both of these claims might, in turn, rest on a more general, PSR-based explanatory worry that it would be *inexplicable* if wholly new features of things—including representations—were brought into being ex nihilo. (A less causal version would be that what is possible is grounded in and *explained through* what is actual, and since we are considering what is possible independent of the actual existence of anything contingent, the *explanantia* of possible properties must be found among the actual properties of something(s) that exist(s) necessarily.)

However, that reasoning involves much more loaded intuitions than what is found in CD, and so I am not sure that a PSR-driven explanatory worry is the best way to motivate DC. Even worse, it is not clear why the creation of wholly new features of things would be any more inexplicable than the creation of wholly new feature *bearers* would be, in which case a strong version of the PSR would immediately conflict with *any* kind of initial creation (as Spinoza thought it did).[11] So for traditional theists like Leibniz, it would be better if the satisfaction of CD and the nature of God's perfection motivated DC and NNP, rather than a relentless PSR.[12]

[10] This would be a kind of representational holism not unlike Spinoza's holist doctrine about the mind-relativity of mental content (see Della Rocca 1996, pp. 44–67). An analogy from fiction might help: readers can grasp and even entertain a character's fearful perspective while at the same time, perhaps by also being aware of how the story ends, prevent that representation of fear from becoming a fearful representation.

[11] See, for examples, Spinoza 1677; Ip15s and Ip28. For an interesting passage in which Leibniz distinguishes an argument based on God's perfection from an argument based on the PSR, even though both reach the same conclusion, see Leibniz 1716; LC 28.

[12] I have argued elsewhere (Newlands 2013, Sect. 3.2) that Leibniz's grounding of creaturely possibilities entirely in God's ideas forces him to reject certain explanatory demands and admit that God's intellect contains some primitive content, so it might be that Leibniz must already reject some versions of the PSR when applied to God.

1.2 The structure of perfection

We have been considering the connection between God's perfection and the possible features of creatures. According to some (though not all) early moderns, God's perfection also implies that God brings about the most perfect possible world in the most perfect possible way. As Spinoza (1677; Ip33s2) puts this idea,

> Things have been produced by God with the highest perfection, since they have followed necessarily from a given most perfect nature…Indeed, from the opposite, it would clearly follow (as I have just shown), that God is not supremely perfect; because if things had been produced by God in another way, we would have to attribute to God another nature, different from that which we have been compelled to attribute to him from the consideration of the most perfect being.

Leibniz famously emphasizes the contingent, choice-based nature of God's production, but he agrees that the perfect content of God's choice follows from God's perfect nature: "Thus it follows from the supreme perfection of God that he chose the best possible plan in producing the universe, a plan in which there is the greatest variety together with the greatest order" (1714; PE 210).[13]

As this last passage suggests, the perfection of God's "plan" for Leibniz involves multiple criteria, here *variety* and *order*. In earlier writings, Leibniz offers a stricter account of the metaphysical structure of perfection, which he calls "harmony." Harmony is "similarity in variety, that is, diversity compensated by identity" (1672; CP 29). Leibniz mostly uses mathematical terms to characterize harmony, though sometimes he appeals to an aesthetic element as well:

> Harmony and discord consist in the ratio of identity to diversity, for harmony is unity in multiplicity, and it is the greatest in the case where it is a unity of the greatest number disordered in appearance and reduced, unexpectedly, by some wonderful ratio to the greatest symmetry (1672; CP 43–5).[14]

According to these passages, harmony is the ratio of identity to diversity. Leibniz sometimes loosens the criteria for harmony, appealing to *unity*, *simplicity*, or *similarity*, rather than *identity*. Even so, identity is the limit case of similarity and unity, such that harmony would be highest if identity was combined in the right way with maximal diversity.[15]

[13] Malebranche is even more explicit that the character of God's ways of acting is meant to optimally reflect God's own attributes (most notably, God's simplicity). See Newlands (forthcoming) for more on Malebranche's version, which differs from Leibniz mostly on an orthogonal issue concerning the relation between worlds and laws.

[14] Translation slightly modified. For additional citations and discussion, see Newlands 2018, p. 34–36. Although I am focusing on the structural element here, there is also a generative component of this account: the simplest base *generates* the greatest variety. (Thanks to Kris McDaniel for emphasizing this point in conversation.).

[15] The reason for thinking identity is the limit case of unity for Leibniz is his frequent insistence that substances are the only true unities, that is, that only individual substance is a unity per se. Hence, complete unity need not and, in per se unities, cannot involve more than one individual.

Leibniz connects this structural measurement to the perfection of both individuals and collections of individuals.[16] First and foremost, God's perfection implies that God is the most harmonious individual:

> Perfection is the degree or quantity of reality. Hence the most perfect thing is that which has the highest degree of reality. That is, the being that contains as much reality, qualities, and powers as is possible to be together in one subject. Hence God is understood to have no limits of presence, duration, power, knowledge, operations and to possess as much [of these qualities] as one thing can possess. Harmony is unity in variety (1677–78(?); A 6.4.1358).

Leibniz begins by describing perfection simply in terms of the amount of reality. But he then explains that perfection is actually a measurement of the amount of reality or properties that a single subject contains. One individual thing containing a maximal range of qualities is the most perfect or most harmonious.[17] God is therefore the most harmonious individual because God "contains as much reality, qualities and powers as is possible to be together in one subject," a rich containment that harkens back to DC.

Leibniz also claims that God compares the degree of harmony exhibited by possible worlds when deciding which world to create.[18] This is to evaluate the perfection of worlds using the standard of God's own perfection, namely maximal harmony. As such, the calculation of relative harmony takes into account not only the amount of reality or qualities a possible world contains, but also the number of individual bearers of those qualities. By this measure, a world in which a single individual exemplifies a certain range of qualities would be more perfect than a world in which a multiplicity of individuals exemplified that same range. Thus, a world's perfection is not additive in the sense that it would be increased simply by adding more individuals to it. With God as the limit case, perfection or harmony involves both *minimizing* individuals while *maximizing* qualities or states of those individuals.[19]

Leibniz thinks God is hardly alone in utilizing this structural measurement of metaphysical perfection. He claims that we too value this kind of structured perfection, a point he makes with everyday examples, from musicians to

[16] Leibniz sometimes treats *perfection* as a gradable type of monadic properties had by individuals; in this sense, each thing can have multiple perfections in varying degrees. Throughout the rest of this discussion, I will focus on Leibniz's account of perfection as a single, tokened polyadic property of individuals and worlds. (For a text in which Leibniz moves back-and-forth quickly, see 1677; A 6.4.1354).

[17] This is reminiscent of Spinoza's claim that "the more being or reality each single thing has [*unumquodque*], the more attributes belong to it" (1677; Ip9).

[18] For examples, see (1671; CP 3), (1677–78(?); A 6.4.1362), (1697; PE 150–1), and (1714; PE 210).

[19] One interpretative reason this is worth emphasizing is that there are passages in which Leibniz claims that maximizing the quantity of reality or essence is God's aim in creation (e.g., (1680(?); A 6.4.1442), (1687; PE 87), (1697; PE 150)), but those passages could be read as shorthand for this structural account, in which the quantity of qualities or states ("reality") is measured against the quantity of individual *bearers* of those states (as the very next paragraph in 1697; PE 150 bears out).

mathematicians, engineers, artists, and even business majors.[20] Leibniz's point is that in general terms and in everyday ways, our preferences often track how well identity and diversity, the One and the Many, are combined.

To contemporary ears, this might sound rather outmoded—apart from Leibniz's theistic setup, why think our (putative) preferences for a one-to-many structure of identity to diversity are reliable guides for theorizing about the world's ontological structure? However, in one of those wonderful epicycles of philosophy, Jonathan Schaffer has recently argued for something structurally similar to Leibniz's account of metaphysical perfection as a reliable guide for theory selection in ontology.

Schaffer (2009, p. 361) describes this preference in terms of a "Bang for the Buck" principle: "What one ought to have is the strongest theory (generating the most derivative entities) on the simplest basis (from the fewest substances)." We ought to prefer—*ceteris paribus*, presumably—ontological accounts that combine a very sparse number of substances with a very plentiful range of derivative entities.

As Leibniz did, Schaffer motivates his principle by appealing to its acceptability in other domains. Schaffer argues that we already accept something like it in the conceptual domain. We prefer theories with few but powerful conceptual primitives, primitives that enable the construction of new and useful derivative concepts. Neither measure alone—the number of primitives or the number of definable, useful concepts—is sufficient to capture the choice-worthiness of a theory's conceptual economy. Put positively, an ideal conceptual economy would involve a single conceptual primitive, in terms of which maximally many useful concepts could be defined. (Schaffer's guiding example is classical mereology, in which many useful concepts can be defined in terms of proper parthood.) Schaffer (2014) argues that it is at least "defeasibly reasonable" to expect the same standards to apply in the ontological realm. Hence, an ideal ontological economy would involve a single fundamental entity that generates maximally many (useful) derivative entities.

Whereas Leibniz appealed to craftsmen and geometers, Schaffer (2014, p. 653) offers a more eco-friendly metaphor:

> Overall, bang-for-the-buck methodology across the ontological and conceptual sides of the ledger recommends a sparse *restrictivist* view of the basis (both the primitive concepts and the fundamental entities) coupled with an abundant *permissivist* view of the superstructure (both the defined concepts and the derivative entities). In place of desert landscapes, I suggest that one cultivates a taste for fruitful orchards, and seek theories whose slender trunks still have the strength to support branching and blossoming canopies.

Schaffer's view is controversial, but the point here is just that Schaffer's contemporary metaphysical gardener is very much like Leibniz's God. Both prefer

[20] He actually refers to "household managers," but this seems like a fair extrapolation. For Leibniz's clearest appeal to the ubiquity of this measure, see (1686; PE 38); see also (1671(?); A 6.1.484–5), (1677–78(?); A 6.4.1359) and (1697; PE 150–1).

to minimize the number of fundamental entities while maximizing the range of diversity that they generate.[21]

In section two, I'll consider a Leibnizian argument that a particular form of metaphysical idealism best satisfies this structural criterion. In section three, I'll argue that monism is actually a better fit—a conclusion that Schaffer himself would surely welcome.

1.3 Perfecting the PSR

Before turning there, however, let us pull these first steps together and connect them to the PSR. According to Leibniz, God's perfect nature includes wisdom, which informs both the manner and content of God's creative actions: "The wisest being chooses the simplest means to achieve the greatest results" (1675; DSR 13). God is a min-maxer, one who uses the fewest "expenditures" or creative steps to achieve the most perfect possible results (Leibniz (1686; 38–39, 1697; PE 150, 1710; T 257)). This suggests a generic principle of least divine action (PLDA):

Principle of Least Divine Action (PLDA): God does not act superfluously.

Leibniz sometimes ties PLDA to the PSR, especially when the PSR is taken as a kind of negative principle like *nihil sine ratione*, nothing without a reason. God does not act superfluously because doing so would be to act without a sufficient reason, contra this negative version of the PSR and its basis in God's perfect wisdom (e.g., Leibniz (1684; PE 38–39), (1707; PE 194), and (1710; T 128)).

But this form of the PSR is rather empty and indiscriminate as it stands, since it does not specify the class of permissible sufficient reasons for acting. Leibniz's account of harmony fills out or completes the explanatory demand of the PSR by specifying the content of God's reasons, and thus specifies what counts as a "non-superfluous action." The relative harmony of possible things is reason-constituting for God, and God only has a sufficient reason to bring about the most harmonious possibility:

> Now since there is an infinity of possible universes in God's ideas, and since only one of them can exist, there must be a sufficient reason for God's choice, a reason which determines him towards one thing rather than another. And this reason can only be found in fitness, or in the degree of perfection, that these worlds contain, each possible world having the right to claim existence in proportion to the perfection it contains (Leibniz 1714; PE 220, my emphasis).[22]

So the relative perfection of possible worlds, ranked according to the structural features I outlined in the previous section, gives explanatory content to God's reasons for acting. Leibniz (1697; PE 151 and 1710; T 253) also asserts the

[21] For a more critical comparison, see Newlands (2017); for direct objections to Schaffer's account, see Baron and Tallant (2018).

[22] See also Leibniz (1677(?); A 6.4.1354), (1697; PE 150–1), and (1714; PE 210).

contrapositive: if the metaphysical perfection of things did not provide God reasons for acting, God would do nothing and consequently nothing contingent would actually exist. The very possibility of creation requires DC, since it is by considering the harmony of possible worlds that God acquires a sufficient reason to create.

Most striking in the passage quoted above is Leibniz's "only." The *only* reasons-constituting features of possibilities are their degrees of metaphysical perfection, their relative "harmony." So when God makes decisions about creation, the *only* criterion God uses is the relative metaphysical perfection of possible worlds and individuals. Lest that make God seem too unmotivated by other factors, such as love or the happiness and virtues of possible creatures, Leibniz frequently claims that these other goods supervene on or are outright reducible to things like the perceptions of metaphysical perfection.[23]

One might also try to distinguish the class of reasons for *whether* to create at all from the reasons concerning *which* world to create, and claim that harmony informs only the latter. But Leibniz (1710; T 128) presents God's not creating anything as just another possibility to be ranked and evaluated, perfection-wise, alongside every possible creation, and he uses this parity to argue that if there were not a single best possible world, God would not create anything (since it would be to bring about a suboptimal possibility, contra God's perfect nature). So for Leibniz, at least, there is no such distinction in kind among God's reasons for acting.

Combined PLDA and the perfection-based PSR, we obtain the following principle of divine action (DA):

> **Divine Action (DA)**: God acts only in order to maximize harmony (understood as metaphysical perfection).[24]

Therefore, Leibniz should be open to the following style of argument [**Master Argument (MA)**] from DA:

(1) There is a possible world W that contains only *x*.
(2) W is more harmonious than any possible world that either lacks *x* or that contains more than *x*.
(3) Therefore, God brings about W [from 1, 2 and DA].
(4) Therefore, the actual world contains only *x* [from 3 and nature of actuality].

[23] For examples from different periods, see Leibniz (1672; CP 29–31), (1686; PE 67–8), (1697; PE 152–3), (1697(?); MP 147), and (1710; T 258). A referee pointed out that Leibniz's God might also be concerned with the amount of moral goodness and divine justice for rational creatures in possible worlds, but Leibniz stoutheartedly insists that those desiderata are satisfied insofar as God takes into account only their perceptions of metaphysical perfection: "It also follows that the world is morally most perfect, since moral perfection is in reality physical perfection with respect to minds" (1697; PE 152–3), and "an intelligent being's *pleasure* [i.e., physical perfection] is simply the perception of beauty, order and perfection…the consequence of this is that in the universe, justice is also observed, for justice is simply order or perfection with respect to minds" (1697(?); MP 146–7).

[24] There are difficult questions about the modal status and modal implications of DA, something Leibniz worried about a great deal. But the path to yet another form of Spinozism—necessitarianism—is an issue I will set aside here. (For my own take on it, see Newlands 2010).

In the next section, we will see a Leibnizian case for substituting *a particular collection of minds (and mind-like substances) and their mental states* for *x*, and then inferring the truth of metaphysical idealism. In the third section, we will consider substituting *God and God's states* for *x*, and then inferring the truth of substance monism. The pressing monistic question for Leibnizians: why is the first substitution valid but not the second?

2 From theism to idealism

Although the characterizations of harmony or metaphysical perfection have been fairly abstract, Leibniz sometimes uses such an underspecified account to reach significant conclusions about the content of our world, as MA suggests. For example, just after defending our commonplace preferences for metaphysically perfect structures, Leibniz adds a sly observation: "Now, the most perfect of all beings, those that occupy the least volume, that is, those that interfere the least with another, are minds who perfections consist in their virtues" (1686; PE 38). Talk about burying the lede! Leibniz's thought is that if God is going to bring about the most harmonious possible world, God would do well to select a world that contains minds, since minds take up "the least volume"—namely, none. As Leibniz puts this point elsewhere, "And the greatest account is taken of minds, since through them there arises the greatest variety in the smallest space" (1697; MP 147).[25]

These claims trade in spatial metaphors, making them hard to pin down. I think Leibniz is trying to say that mental substances are, by nature, more harmonious individuals than bodies. The key idea is that *representational* space allows for a kind of object proliferation without requiring a corresponding increase in the number of non-representational objects. Representations of things can be added to a world without adding fundamental entities beyond whatever is doing the representing. God can create representations of tables without creating molecules, wood, carpenters, and the like.

Indeed, Leibniz suggests, representational space can be, in a certain sense, unrestricted. If a mind's representations were properly organized, one individual mind could represent an entire universe of things. "Since the nature of the monad is representational, nothing can limit it to represent only a part of things" (1714; PE 220). And since representations are not parts of minds, according to Leibniz, mental substances can be mereologically simple while still containing an infinitely complex array of diverse states, namely their representations:

> This diversity must involve a multitude in the unity or in the simple…As a result, there must be a plurality of properties and relations in the simple substance, although it has no parts. The passing state which involves and

[25] For early versions of this idea, see Leibniz 1676; DSR 21–23 and 29. For another middle period version, see Leibniz 1687; PE 87.

> represents a multitude in the unity or in the simple substance is nothing other than what one calls perception (1714; PE 214).[26]

This is the great—and terrifying!—feature of minds, at least according to those in the Cartesian tradition: minds can represent a vast range of objects even if those objects do not exist independently of being thought about. Purely representational space is the harmony-based advantage of minds (or mind-like things capable of representation[27]) over non-minds. "However, thinking is also a certain reality, and [it is] so much greater because by thinking, things are multiplied in a way, for individual minds contain, in some manner, the representation of the whole world" (1677–8(?); A 6.4.1359–60).

Indeed, insofar as everything can be the object of thought, a mereologically simple mind that internally generated the greatest range of compossible representational states would be a perfect example of structural harmony: one individual thing, maximally many diverse states. Hence, a promising strategy for God to increase the overall harmony or perfection of the world would be to populate it with minds, at least insofar as those individuals were themselves also appropriately unified.

One huge gap in this setup is that Leibniz does not show that *only* things with representations could have this maximally harmonious structure. He argues only that minds would be more perfect than purely material substances in virtue of minds' representational capacities. But to conclude from this that idealism is actually *true* (as per (4) of MA), rather than only that there are no material substances, Leibniz would also need to show either (a) that minds are more perfect than any other possible kind of substance or (b) that having representations and having material parts are the only two possible kinds of fundamental properties, and I do not know of anywhere that he explicitly does either.

The closest he comes (that I have found) just highlights the worrisome gap. In the passage from 1714 quoted above, Leibniz moves from the claim that "there must be a plurality of properties…in the simple substance" to the conclusion that the "state which involves and represents a multitude…in the simple substance is nothing other than what one calls perception."[28] But even if perceptions *can* play this many-to-one bearer role, it does not follow that *only* perceptions can do so, even if we can't think of any equally good possibilities. And to just bluntly add a representational

[26] Although Leibniz calls these states "perceptions," it is now common to think that what we ordinarily call perceptions are essentially embodied forms of cognition. So I will stick with "representations," which I take to be the sorts of states that disembodied mental substances could have (if such substances are metaphysically possible at all.) In the present context, a *tu quoque* with theists will suffice: whatever sort of mental states God has that have the right form and content to allow God to think about possible worlds prior to creation is the relevant kind of mental state for this argument..

[27] For ease, I will drop the "or mind-like" qualification, as the relevant feature of minds that will do the work is their representational capacity, which Leibniz thinks mental substances can have without being rational minds.

[28] Leibniz makes a similar slide in 1714; PE 207.

requirement on harmony, as he does in the underlined portion, is to unfairly stack the deck in favor of idealism.[29]

Still, disproving the existence of physical substances, even without proving the truth of idealism, would be a pretty astounding achievement. However, since our main focus will not be on evaluating this argument for idealism per se, let us grant Leibniz the claim that appropriately coordinated and richly content-filled minds are more perfect than any possible array of non-mental finite substances.[30]

Consider, then, the following Leibnizian case for a form of theistic idealism, according to which only minds and mind-dependent representational states actually exist. Suppose God wants to create. By what criteria does God choose what to create? According to DA, God picks the most metaphysically perfect, the most harmonious possible world. Pretending for a moment that there are sequential steps to creation, what does God need to do to create the most metaphysically perfect world?

For reasons we just saw Leibniz give, the relative perfection of minds gives God a sufficient reason to create at least some of them and endow each with representations. Which representations should God give them? To increase diversity at the level of mental states, God could give each mind somewhat different representations, but to maximize unity at the same time, the representations across minds had better not be too different. Here's a promising harmony-based strategy: God could give each mind the same infinite set of representational *objects* (satisfying the identity condition of harmony), but vary the representational *character* of their representations (satisfying the diversity condition). Each mind will then represent the same intentional objects with differing arrays of clarity and distinctness.[31]

Of course, that purely synchronic account might threaten to collapse into chaos and incoherence too, so perhaps God needs to spread out each individual's representations. But to retain unity among an individual's mental states (beyond the bare numerical identity of their subject), God might also want to create a function—let's call it a *law of the series*—that moves each mind from one representational state to the next. That works within each mind, but the threat of global disunity arises again unless God so coordinates these individual laws across different minds

[29] There is a different backdoor fix that would unhelpfully complicate the dialectic. Suppose we grant Leibniz an additional a posteriori premise derivable from introspection: *God actually created finite minds* (see 1714, PE 215). Then MA will be: *Given* that God in fact created minds with their representational states, God did not need to create anything *else* in order to achieve optimal harmony, and so, by DA, God didn't, and hence idealism is true. But in this context, that's unhelpful because it spots Leibniz a premise that, if the next section is correct, he is not entitled to (introspection be damned), namely that God has created finite substances at all.

[30] As a referee pointed out, it is worth keeping in mind that Leibniz offers other, independent arguments for idealism that might not be susceptible to the same monistic pressures. My target is perfection-based arguments like MA, rather than, e.g., Leibniz's argument from aggregates (1714, PE 213).

[31] For examples, see Leibniz (1686; PE 47), (1698; L 493), (1714; PE 214 and 220), and (1716; LC 57). As a referee tactfully noted, one might be suspicious of the Leibnizian thesis that all varieties and aspects of representational character really supervene on the distribution of representational clarity and distinctness. For a helpful discussion that gives a good sense of how rich the Leibnizian resources might be here, see Jorgensen (2015).

such that each series of representations unfolds with a maximal degree of inter-subjective coherence. So let's suppose God does this coordinating too. (We've now reached the basic outline of Leibniz's form of idealism in his 1714 "Monadology").

What else does God need to do? The striking idealist answer from DA: *nothing*. At least, God does not need to create any non-mental stuff that somehow corresponds to—much less *informs*—the intentional objects of created minds. God creates representations of a common world (and also the corresponding purely intentional objects if our idealist isn't a Berkeleyan phenomenalist). For God to then also create the common world itself, independent of the minds and their representational contents, well, that would be a bit superfluous, wouldn't it? God would be taking one creative step too many, in violation of PLDA.

Admittedly, creating extra-mental entities like electrons or rocks would add additional diversity to the world, both at the level of fundamental *kinds* and at the level of *individuals*. But God doesn't care solely about adding diversity, according to DA. To add an irreducibly different kind of entity makes "reduction to identity" outright impossible at the kind level. To add more individuals into the world that do not exhibit the one-in-many harmonious structure that each mind exhibits is *ipso facto* to add lesser harmonious individuals into the world. But adding individuals of an irreducibly different kind, each of which is less harmonious than even the least harmonious actual mind, seems guaranteed to reduce the world's overall harmony. God appears to already have achieved maximal unity—identity!—at the kind level and maximal harmony at the individual level if God creates just minds and their coordinated representational states. But by DA, God does not bring about a less harmonious world than God could; hence God rests without creating anything besides minds and mind-dependent states.

3 From idealism to monism

Such, at any rate, is how we are imagining our idealist argues using a form of MA. But let's go back to the beginning of that wonderful story. We granted Leibniz the claim that God creates minds because each individual mind exemplifies more perfect-making harmony than any non-minded thing could possibly exemplify. Given DA, that may be a sufficient, perfection-based reason for God to create *a* mind. But why should God create more than one of them? Here our imagined idealist faces a worrisome *tu quoque*. Just as God need not and hence should not and hence does not create extra-mental stuff corresponding to the intentional objects of representers, it seems that God also need not and hence should not and hence does not create extra representers beyond one.

Once again, it is true that additional representers would result in an increase in numerical richness, but at a staggering cost to identity (namely, maximally high for each distinct mind added!). To use Schaffer's orchard metaphor, why create a whole orchard of apple trees when God could instead create a single, super apple tree that contained as many apples—diverse representational states—as the orchard would have held? God is too perfect of a min-maxer to do something so superfluous.

What about the desired variability among the *states* of representers? Once again, God need not create any additional representers to get this. That's the wonderful thing about Leibnizian minds: they each contain all the intentional objects of every one of their representing worldmates. According to Leibniz (1686; PE 47 and 1714; PE 220), each of us already has all the same representations of the entire universe in each of our minds.

Ah, but what about the diversity among the *character* of their representations—the varying degrees of clarity and distinctness, the perspectival viewing of the same city from "different directions" (1714, PE 220)? That's a rather thin kind of diversity to insist on preserving, but even so, God might not need to create additional representers to accomplish it. There are no time constraints, so God could add additional sequences of representations to the sole mind's initial sequence of representations, only from a slightly different "vantage point" (i.e., with a different mix of clarity and distinctness). To insist in reply that the variability should occur *simultaneously* is to resort to a consideration that, so far as I can tell, is not part of the calculus of Leibnizian harmony.[32]

In a well-known letter to Des Bosses (1715; LDB 339), Leibniz admits the metaphysical possibility of such a lonely monad world (LMW), though he claims that it would cut against God's wisdom to actualize it:

> He could absolutely [have created it], but not hypothetically, because he decided to act always most wisely and most harmoniously. Still, there would be no deception of rational creatures, even if not everything outside of them corresponded exactly to their phenomena, indeed even if nothing did, as if there were just one mind; for everything would come about as if all the other things existed, and this mind, were it acting reasonably, would not invite blame on itself.

But according to DA, God's wisdom takes into account only considerations of relative perfection or harmony, and I cannot see how creating LMW rather than a more populous world of minds would violate DA.[33] Whatever be the advantages of non-lonely monad worlds, they are less harmonious than LMW.

It gets worse. Let's back up to an even earlier step in our idealist's set-up. Recall that according to Leibniz, *God* is the most perfect, the most harmonious individual.

[32] Admittedly, Leibniz thinks each perceptual series in infinitely long, so it will be a while before the sequence begins to repeat. But I am really just working up to the monistic upshot here, so even if this worry entails that God would have a perfection-based reason to create a multiplicity of minds if God were to create any of them, I will argue shortly that God does not have a sufficient reason to create *any* finite minds in the first place.

[33] Leibniz might be seen as reasoning *ab effectu* here, much as he often does when faced with objections to the bestness of our world. Perhaps we cannot see *why* LMW is not the best, but since we know that ours is not the lonely world, we know *ab effectu* that LMW is not the most perfect. There are reasons to be suspicious of this parallel, however. For one, the sorts of considerations that Leibniz (1710; T 135) thinks explain our inability to calculate the overall bestness of our world do not apply when calculating the relative metaphysical perfection of lonely and non-lonely worlds. For another—although this threatens to dissolve into familiar skeptical worries—in light of the argument above, exactly whence lies our (!) confidence that our world *isn't* LMW? (I'll leave it up to the reader to decide which of us is the real perceiver in that case; I know which way I'm voting).

God is indeed the paradigmatic case of harmony: the One amid the Many, an individual, self-identical subject of all possible perfections. In unpacking DC, Leibniz further claimed that God is omnisubjective. Prior to creation, God represents every possible universe from every possible perspectival and partial representational vantage point (*as well as* from God's own non-perspectival vantage point, Leibniz noted). This was the bite of NNP, which was itself just a consequence of Leibniz's version of DC, according to which every possible creaturely state—including every possible representational state for possible minds—is already contained in, seen by, and evaluated by God.

For ease of expression, let's call the possible state of affairs in which God exists alone and creates nothing else for all eternity the *lonely divine world* (LDW).[34] In LDW, there exists only God and all of God's maximally diverse mental states, which include every possible representation of every possible representer. Leibniz must again admit that LDW represents a genuine possibility, lest God be necessitated to create and we fall into a different form of Spinozism. So according to Leibniz, LDW is possible. According to the Spinozistic monist, something like LDW is actual. The Spinozistic question for Leibniz from MA: *in what structural feature lies the deficiency of LDW compared with any other possible world*?

There is, of course, a long-standing puzzle in philosophical theology about why a perfect being would create anything at all, one that received renewed attention in the 17th century. Here we can push a Spinozistic version of this concern onto Leibniz: by Leibniz's own lights, LDW is more harmonious than any scenario in which God creates anything at all. The addition of even one created substance that possesses a proper subset of God's actual attributes and states would bring about a comparative decrease in harmony.

The only additional diversity would be at the level of individuals, but the mere addition of individuals without any greater diversity of fundamental attributes or perspectives would be undercut by the loss of identity, in just the same way that the addition of non-mental individuals would introduce a net loss of global harmony according to the idealist version of MA. Monads—finite mental substances that Leibniz (1698; L 493 and 1714; PE 207) individuates in terms of occupying distinct perceptual perspectives—are therefore superfluous. It seems that God's taking *any* creative steps would be taking one creative step too many, pace PLDA. The creation of anything distinct from God introduces an element of disharmony and imperfection, as every other possible world is less metaphysically perfect than LDW. Hence, by DA, God should rest before God creates anything at all. Substance monism, not Leibniz's theistic idealism, is the appropriate conclusion of MA.

I do not know how seriously Leibniz took this particular Spinozistic threat, but as time went on, he began to emphasize other, weaker kinds of unity, such as

[34] This label is somewhat infelicitous. Contra "world," Leibniz does not think that God is a member of any possible world, a point that by itself should give us pause when assimilating his modal views to a contemporary possible world framework. But that does not matter here, so long as Leibniz admits that it is metaphysically possible that God create nothing. Contra "lonely," Christian monotheists like Leibniz can point to the rich inter-personal relations among the persons of the Trinity, so it is "lonely" only in the sense that it lacks any substances other than the sole divine substance.

nomological or *expressive* unity, rather than *identity* or *simplicity*, as one of the two criteria for harmony or metaphysical perfection. From Spinoza's perspective, it is difficult to see this shift as anything other than a concession. If we cannot have the One, then maybe we need to settle for some kind of organized configuration of the Many. But if I am right here, the Leibnizian should admit that this diminishment of metaphysical perfection is at least one cost the Spinozist need not pay.

4 An epilogue on the dead

There is a delicious twist to the historical version of this exchange. Late in his life, Leibniz returned to the topic of harmony as metaphysical perfection in correspondence with Wolff. At Wolff's prompting, Leibniz (1715; PE 233) rehearses his general line about metaphysical perfection. "The perfection that a thing has is greater to the extent that there is more agreement in greater variety, whether we observe it or not." He even reiterates his older, identity-based formula. "Perfection is the harmony of things…that is, the state of agreement or identity in variety" (emphasis mine).[35] But rather than acknowledge his closeness to Spinoza here, Leibniz takes a pot shot. "Spinoza didn't understand these things when he eliminated perfection from things as a chimera of our mind, but it belongs to the divine mind not less but more."

As a reading of Spinoza, Leibniz's criticism is misguided, and I've argued elsewhere (Newlands 2017) that Spinoza uses a similar account of metaphysical perfection to generate his own monistic picture. However, if I am right here about the ontological pressures from metaphysical perfection, then substance monism is actually more faithful to this account of perfection than is Leibniz's theistic idealism. In other words, not only did Spinoza preempt Leibniz on metaphysical perfection—he also beat him at his own game.

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[35] Shockingly, Ariew and Garber add a footnote to the word "identity" in this passage: "This might be a slip of the pen for 'regularity'." *Slip of the pen, indeed!* A more apt editorial comment might have been: "Old habits die hard".

CP *Confessio Philosophi: Papers Concerning the Problem of Evil*, 1671–1678, trans. and ed. by Robert C. Sleigh Jr. (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2005)
DSR *De Summa Rerum*, trans. by G.H.R. Parkinson (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1992)
G *Die philosophischen Schriften von Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz*, ed. by C. I. Gerhardt (Berlin: Weidmann, 1875–90; repr., Hildesheim: Olms, 1965)
L *Philosophical Papers and Letters*, trans. and ed. by Leroy E Loemker, 2nd ed. (Dordrecht and Boston: Reidel, 1969)
LDB *The Leibniz–Des Bosses Correspondence*, trans. By Brandon C. Look and Donald Rutherford (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2007)
LC *Leibniz and Clarke: Correspondence*, ed. by Roger Ariew (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company, 2000)
MP *Philosophical Writings*, trans. by Mary Morris and G.H.R. Parkinson (London: J.M. Dent & Sons, 1973)
PE *Philosophical Essays*, ed. and trans. by Roger Ariew and Daniel Garber (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company, 1989)
T *Theodicy: Essays on the Goodness of God, the Freedom of Man, and the Origin of Evil*, trans. by EM Huggard (Chicago: Open Court, 1985)

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