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DeVonté Fuller

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Northern Illinois University

“A Response to Leibniz’s Monadology”

A Capstone Submitted to the

University Honors Program

in Partial Fulfillment of the

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With Honors

Department Of Philosophy

By

DeVonté Fuller

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Introduction

Gottfried W. Leibniz is one of the many philosophers responsible for significant contributions to the discipline of metaphysics. This school of thought attempts to determine what exists, and a variety of philosophers have advanced theories that they believe to be the best in answering this question: what is reality? Leibniz argued for a version of Idealism, which is the theory that all material objects are fundamentally mind-dependent. This is to say that reality cannot be distinguished from that which is mental. In making his argument for his version of Idealism, Leibniz strayed from the dominant beliefs of his time. He introduced the system of monads to explain the foundation of reality in which his claims regarding the mind-dependence of the world can be found. Many set out to expose the flaws they believe to cause his Idealist arguments to fail. His critics base these arguments on the premise that Leibniz's system of monads commits him to Occasionalism, a theory that Leibniz claimed was distinct from his version of Idealism. Though some philosophers come to his aid to uphold the distinction between his version of Idealism and Occasionalism, others are quick to dismiss his claims due to what they believe to be inconsistencies and a heavy reliance on a perfect divine being. Despite these contentions, I intend to demonstrate that Leibnizian Idealism withstands arguments that aim to label him an occasionalist for his believed role of God in his system of Monads.

Issue

In order to understand this issue and the contentions raised against Leibniz's system of Monads, a critical analysis of *The Monadology* is required. Without proper comprehension of Monads and their interaction, no individual can adequately refute Leibniz's arguments. Leibniz argues that both God and creatures are causally active beings. This is to say that both God and creatures are responsible for the changes in the reality of the world. This is the first believed

vulnerability of Leibniz's claims, which paves the way for the allegation that creatures are not truly efficient causes on Leibniz's account. If this assertion were true, then Leibniz would be labeled an occasionalist, thus forcing him to concede that God is the only real cause in the world. I believe that Leibniz successfully evades these arguments, but before proceeding to the reasons for this, I will first explain the arguments in *The Monadology*.

Monadology

Leibniz believes that Monads are the most simple substance. In his discussion of their properties, he claims that they have neither extension nor form, which is to say that they have no shape or figure (Leibniz 1714). As they are the most simple substance, Monads cannot be formed by the combination of smaller parts (because no such thing exists), which allows Leibniz to reason that they cannot come into existence or be destroyed by natural means. Compounds, on the other hand, are the collection of these Monads and go through changes with respect to the changes of Monads. The changes of Monads is a topic that Leibniz takes great care to explain so as to not allow confusion or inconsistency. To change, according to Leibniz, is to endure the alteration of a number of parts within a compound while other parts maintain their state. These states or "conditions" in which these simple substances and compounds can be found are referred to by Leibniz as perceptions (Leibniz 1714). Because Monads are indivisible, they themselves cannot undergo the process of change in relation to their parts as compounds can because Monads have no parts. The change in Monads, therefore, must be internal.

Leibniz uses this presumption—that Monads must endure internal change—to further his claims on the properties of Monads. Leibniz refers to this internal force responsible for the change in Monads as appetite. As Monads are self-sufficient, they have a degree of perfection, "which makes them the source of their internal activities" (Leibniz 1714). The concept of

perfection will become more relevant during the discussion of God and His perfection. Both the perceptions and appetition of Monads are unique to each individual Monad, for these properties are markers within a series that is specific to the nature of each Monad (Leibniz). The existence of such a series of markers denotes that every perception of a Monad is the natural consequence of its preceding state. Leibniz appeals to physics to come to this conclusion, saying that motion can only come naturally from motion, which gives him reason to believe that perceptions can only come from prior perceptions. This idea is the foundation for Pre-established Harmony, which I will return to later.

Leibniz proposes an argument for the existence of God *a priori*. According to Leibniz, reasoning is founded on two principles, one of which says that the opposite to that which we deem false must be true. This is the principle of contradiction. The second principle is that of sufficient reason, which has little relevance in the arguments of this paper and will not be discussed further. Using this principle, his argument is constructed as follows:

1) Suppose that God were possible.

2) If there is any reality in eternal truths, which are possibilities not dependent on God's will but are instead dependent on His understanding, then this reality has to be founded in the existence of a necessary being in whom all possible things actually exist. Here, the word "actually" seems to imply that a thing truly exists as opposed to merely being possible.

3) Because there is nothing that can negate or contradict the existence of a being in whom all possible things actually exist, nor can anything interfere with its existence, this necessary being (God) must necessarily exist if it were possible.

4) Therefore, the possibility of God is sufficient to make known the existence of God *a priori*.

Having argued that God necessarily exists, Leibniz then begins to explain the properties of God that follow from these inferences.

Leibniz claims that God, by virtue of being the source of all things, is absolutely perfect, which is to say that he is infinite or without limit. Not only is God the infinite source of power, but He is also infinitely wise and knowledgeable. His will, as Leibniz defines it, is responsible for producing change according to the principle of the best, which is the result of God's infinite wisdom which gives Him sufficient reason for the creation of one actual universe rather than any other (Leibniz 1714). This point motivates Leibniz to introduce Pre-established Harmony, which is where a vital instance of God's role among Monads is discussed.

“For God, comparing two simple substances, finds in each reasons which oblige Him to adapt the other to it” (Leibniz 1714). This passage demonstrates the interaction between God and Monads when some change is involved. Monads, adhering to the perfect order of the universe according to Leibniz, operate in a way that aligns with all other Monads, which leads to the appearance of harmony between Monads. It is as if every Monad operates in tandem with all others, but this concept is difficult to understand with Leibniz's claim that Monads can have no physical influence on other Monads (Leibniz 1714). Because Monads do not causally interact with each other within this system of coordinated and causally efficacious Monads, Leibniz believes that change can only occur through the participation of God because God, who alone is responsible for all Monads since the beginning of their creation, “should have regard to it” (Leibniz 1714). Without causal power, Monads rely on the influence of God to effect reality, and the Pre-established Harmony principle to which Leibniz ascribes provides that every substance expresses its perceptions in accordance with all others.

Occasionalism

Upon basic inspection of these claims, it may appear that Leibniz makes no substantive differentiation between God's causal power and his intervention in the activity of all Monads. This interpretation, though incorrect, can lead an individual to label Leibniz an occasionalist. In order to understand Occasionalism, I refer to Malebranche, whose writings provide a comprehensive explanation of the theory. Malebranche's account provides that God is the only causal agent in the world, which is to say that he alone has the power to effect reality, stripping all substances of the power to produce change (Lennon 1997). To conclude that Leibniz is an occasionalist is to say that he does not assign to substances other than God any causal power, but Leibniz holds that this is not the case. He believes that his arguments cannot be reduced to mere Occasionalism, and though strong objections are made against him, I believe that he is able to lay to rest each of these because of the responses provided by Sukjae Lee.

In order to come to any conclusion about whether Leibniz can truly be labeled an occasionalist, Lee (2004) lays the groundwork for Concurrentism, the belief that both God and creatures are directly involved in the production of change. Making this claim implies that God is present in every instance of world activity and participates in each of those instances immediately rather than mediately. Malebranche, whose description of Occasionalism Lee uses to focus his arguments, argues that God engages in continuous conservation, which has two separate implications. The first is that God is responsible *ex nihilo* (from nothing) for the entire state of the world upon the initial act of creation and is responsible for its destruction. The second is that God repeatedly engages in the process of creation and destruction at every moment, thus creating a series of effects through which the perceptions of the world are created. On this view, there is nothing for creatures to do in terms of being responsible for the states of the world, which leads Malebranche to conclude that creatures have no genuine causal powers.

Lee argues that though Leibniz agrees in this idea of continuous conservation, he is not forced to Occasionalism. Leibniz himself does not believe that Occasionalism is necessitated by continuous conservation: "...that which does not act does not merit the name of substance" (Lee 2004). Lee then provides an exposition of the stark differences between the two authors that I believe is best left to Lee's own prose:

As a divine concurrentist, Leibniz appears to be trying to weave an account of causality from two key strands of his mature philosophy that pull in opposite directions. On the one hand, given his unwavering commitment to the genuine causal activity inherent in finite substances, we get a picture of the universe, full of substances that are intrinsically active and mutually harmonious, each bringing about a marvelous array of events, so that the world appears to run on its own power, free from intervention and influence. On the other hand, however, there is Leibniz's deep commitment to central theological principles, which in some cases so emphasize the role of divine activity that occasionalists like Malebranche literally infer their thesis of occasionalism from them. In other words, Leibniz's endorsement of the 'conservation is but continuous creation' principle reveals the deeply theistic side of his metaphysics wherein the resulting picture appears uncomfortably close to being occasionalistic: worldly events and creatures are deeply dependent upon divine causation, so much so that the conservation of the world is none other than its continuous recreation.

(Lee 2004)

This general claim that Leibniz is an occasionalist has a number of refutations that employ slightly varying interpretations of causal contributions. Lee (2004) discusses one interpretation of Robert Sleigh, who provides an account of Leibnizian causal contribution in this

way: “creatures contribute by producing their imperfections in their states, while God contributes by producing the perfections.” Lee does not uphold this view because it is contentious with the positions that Leibniz takes in his textual works. Lee believes that Leibniz, as can be seen in his other writings, posits that this is not the appropriate way to understand this interaction. In response to this view, Lee provides what he believes is a better view: the *Neoplatonic* view. Under this view, Leibniz can uphold his concurrentist views while preserving the notion of continuous conservation. The *Neoplatonic* view says that creatures are causally active as they have the power to make rational determinations. Being the source of rational determinations, creatures are the source of neither perfections nor imperfections, which frees them from the clutches of Sleigh’s interpretation. This determination not only prescribes the subsequent states of the creature, but it also “demands” in the sense that the value or goodness of the state of affairs is what motivates God’s decision to bring it into actual existence and sustain it over other possible scenarios” (Lee 2004). Lee asserts that this power to reason is in the interest of producing what is best (which is to say what is consistent with the perfect order of the universe). By extension the power to demand that God produce causes is just as real as God’s power to create and conserve. If we are to accept Lee’s proposition that both creatures and God have this causal power, then Sleigh improperly attributes all causal power to God by making creatures only responsible for passive causal powers by virtue of being able to provide their imperfections (Lee 2004).

Lee’s interpretation accords with Leibniz’s understanding of imperfections. Leibniz understands imperfections not as inherent sources of evil within creatures. Instead, he believes that imperfection is the result of privation or lack of perfection. Leibniz reasons that God’s perfection requires that all other substances be imperfect, for this is the only way to maintain the

a priori knowledge of God's existence. With this interpretation, other arguments against Leibniz still fall short.

Jefferey K. McDonough joins Lee in arguing that Leibniz does not lean toward an occasionalist position. By insisting that substances are active sources of change and development and are capable of free choice, Leibniz is able to maintain his ideals. To make this claim, McDonough first establishes the common beliefs surrounding God's efficient causal influence, which occurs in three ways. The first is Divine Creation, which is the action of bringing everything into existence out of nothing. Divine Conservation is the second, which asserts that the world depends on God for its continued existence. The final is Divine Concurrence, which states that any effect within the order of nature requires God's influence in some way. McDonough then dedicates the text to discussing the moral and physical problems of evil that reside in each of these causal powers of God in order to demonstrate that Leibniz's God does delegate causal power to secondary causal agents.

The first of God's causal influence is Divine Creation, which governs the manner in which the world is brought into existence. McDonough wants to show that God is neither morally nor physically responsible for the initial imperfections of the world to construct his later argument in favor of Leibniz's positions. The problem presented by McDonough is this: that God has moral responsibility over the existence of evil given that evil exists in the world and that God is obviously responsible for the creation of the world. To combat this claim, McDonough believes that resolution of the problem requires that evil come from a source that is not God because his perfection demonstrates infinite justice, goodness, and wisdom. He appeals to Leibniz for his rebuttal to this claim. Through God's omniscience, he comprehends all possible worlds and chooses the best possible world for creation (McDonough 33). According to Leibniz,

this decision was both morally necessary and morally free. It was morally necessary because God's perfection must demand that he create the best possible world, but it was morally free because God very well could have chosen not to act in this way. However, because God created the best possible world, it follows that this world "must fall short of the absolute perfection of God himself," which vindicates God from having to accept the evils that exist due to not having created a world free of imperfections (McDonough 33). McDonough goes on to say that these imperfections are essential elements of the best of all possible worlds as is demonstrated by Leibniz's reasoning for God's moral necessity, which lends itself toward the resolution of the physical problem: that everything in creation depends on God and his will.

Leibniz believes that "God creates only what is good, positive, or active in the world" (McDonough 34). McDonough understands imperfection of finite beings to be privation or absences of goodness, which coordinates with Lee's perspective on imperfection. Having stated this, McDonough believes that the resolution of this physical problem requires that it be possible for everything to depend on God while not being responsible for evil. Given that Monads, as stated by Leibniz, have "no windows through which the genuine causal influence of other creatures might pass," it can be determined that the existence of substances that are responsible for their own action and passions as a result of their distinct appetitions supports the notion of genuine secondary causes. This is to say that substances do not only strictly adhere to passive, occasional causes. With these criteria, McDonough concludes that Monads, who depend on God for creation as he is the only power capable of such activity, are imperfect in the sense that their being finite requires an absence of goodness, which shows that God, allowing genuine secondary causal agents that are limited in this way, is not physically responsible for the evil that exists in the world.

Divine Conservation is defined by McDonough as "...the compatibility between God's conservation of creatures and the possibility of change within the order of nature" (McDonough 36). This definition aims at demonstrating that God's perpetual causal activity is necessary for the continued existence of the world, which is to say that without this continual support from God, the world would cease to exist (McDonough 2007, 37). To combat this claim, McDonough sets out to dismantle the notion that anything that relies on God for its existence must also rely on God for its continued existence. He argues that whatever deficiency is found in a thing's being upon creation must persist for as long as it exists in the world. This notion, however, leads to two different types of conservation.

The first, labeled *per se* (immediate cause), involves bringing an entity into existence *ex nihilo* at every individual instant. The second, labeled *per accidens* (mediate cause), involves an ever-going process of conservation that "begins when a creature comes into existence *ex nihilo* and ceases the moment that it is annihilated" (McDonough 2007, 47). Leibniz favors the second view, asserting that creatures do act upon already existing objects (themselves), which would not be compatible if those creatures (and all of their qualities) were to drop out of existence prior to being recreated moment after moment (McDonough 2007, 51). McDonough cites Leibniz in his work, *Causa Dei*, which at much greater length describes the activity of a perfect being. From this McDonough derives this claim: There is a sound doctrine which teaches that this divine preservation in existence is...comparable to the rays continually emitted by the sun (McDonough 2007, 38).

McDonough provides similar reasoning to address the moral and physical issues with this understanding of conservation. Morally, God's perfection leads him to engage in a sort of divine calculation to determine what is best for all possible worlds. Having determined that God (as a

result of his infinite goodness) created the best possible world with necessarily imperfect elements, God also has sufficient reason to conserve these imperfect elements (McDonough 2007, 40). Likewise, God has no physical responsibility for the evils that occur as a result of conservation because God only immediately creates (and therefore conserves) that which is positive, which leaves him to only indirectly conserve the limitations (privation) of the world's finite nature. With these considerations, McDonough believes that Leibniz has again evaded inconsistency, and he maintains that Leibniz has not yet been committed to occasionalism.

Finally, Divine Concurrence determines how creatures and God act together in bringing about reality. The main contention of Divine Concurrence is that God's role in bringing about effects within the order of nature cannot be reconciled with the demands of Leibniz's system of Monads. McDonough is of the mind that Leibniz favors a belief in which concurrence occurs with both the immediate cause of God and the production (mediate cause) of a creature toward some desired effect. On this view, McDonough explains that God's concurrence with each creature for every effect is "special," which denotes a sort of uniqueness that is had by all events whose occasion requires the participation of both God and some creature (McDonough 2007, 43). The complexity of this theory leads McDonough to provide a simpler analogy. Consider an electric toaster whose functions require two "agents" that work through a single, immediate action in the production of an effect. The causal influence of the electricity and the toaster combine through a single, immediate action in the production of a "heating" or "toasting" (McDonough 2007, 43).

This understanding of God's role in the activity of creatures illustrates the moral and physical problem of Divine Concurrence. McDonough believes that the solutions to these problems follows from God's vindication of moral and physical responsibility in the other types

of causal influence. Having been determined that God is neither morally nor physically responsible for the creation and conservation of imperfection in the world, God—according to the same lines of reasoning—is relieved of these responsibilities in the activity of creatures. Furthermore, in accord with God’s causal contribution and the preclusion of God’s participation in evil, God’s concurrence with creatures is limited insofar as the action itself has perfection. Beyond this perfection, the action is bound by the imperfect nature of finite creatures (McDonough 2007, 46).

Each of these three types of God’s causal influence—Divine Creation, Divine Conservation, and Divine Concurrence—have allowed McDonough to present and refute the main arguments used to pin Leibniz as an occasionalist. By successfully demonstrating that God alone bears either moral or physical responsibility in these facets, an individual would be right to mark Leibniz’s God as the sole causal power of the world. However, as McDonough shows through his series of reasoning, these arguments do not successfully demonstrate that God bears this responsibility. These occasionalist interpretations, therefore, oppose Leibniz’s statements regarding the existence of things beyond God himself, the agency of creatures, and God’s involvement in evil with respect to the finite nature of the world (McDonough 2007, 53).

Conclusion

Lee’s interpretation of rational determination is critical to a strong base on which Leibnizian Idealism can stand. Bolstered by this notion of rational determination, Jeffrey McDonough is able to argue in favor of the genuine causal power of secondary agents, which then lets him conclude that both God and creatures possess a role in the actualization of reality. Leibniz undoubtedly faces a number of weighty arguments against his genuine causal power of secondary agents, but Lee and McDonough together create an argument structure that keeps

Leibniz from falling victim to being labeled an occasionalist. The synthesis of the arguments of these two individuals ought to be used above other interpretations of Leibniz's Monadology because not only do they accurately portray Leibniz's beliefs, but they also make inferences from these beliefs that are consistent with Leibniz's claims across his various written texts. This sort of agreement is paramount when attempting to shake the foundation of one's claims, and without this fortified system provided by Lee and McDonough, no individual I believe can present substantive failures on Leibniz's behalf. Therefore, Leibniz effectively evades occasionalist criticism on these grounds.

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