The Paradigm of Unity:

Self, Substance, and Synthesis in Leibnizian Metaphysics

Matt Maclean

University of Victoria

The question of substance has always been of fundamental concern. What is being? What is reality? The question about substance is the perennial question of the underlying nature of things, of the reality behind appearances. In the philosophy of Leibniz, one encounters a philosopher for whom the question is of paramount concern. Leibniz's attempt to provide an answer is in no way without its complexities, but is perhaps best brought into view when approached through a guiding idea. For Leibniz, as for many before him, the concept of substance is inseparable from the concept of unity. Where there is substance there is unity and where there is unity there is substance. But where is there unity? It is with this question in mind that I propose we look to the account of substance that Leibniz gives. It is my view that Leibniz comes to his position on substance through confrontation with that which is intrinsically unified and unifying — the self. It is here that Leibniz can establish the roots for his ontology which will encompass the entirety of things. To provide a further interpretation in support of this view, I will also introduce the problem of the one and the many into the discussion.

In order to understand Leibniz's conception of individual substance, it is worth looking briefly at (the traditional account of substance found in) its genesis in the works of Aristotle. Leibniz's account, differing though it does, is nonetheless informed by his ancient predecessor. For Aristotle, only the fully determinate existing particular can be said to be a substance in its fullest sense, that is, as something ontologically primordial. In the *Categories*, Aristotle defines substance as that which "is neither said of any subject, nor in any subject — for instance, an individual man or horse."[53] Primary substances cannot be predicated of any subject, nor can they be contained in any subject. Rather they are the fundamental subjects of all predication. Anything that one predicates of man or horse as a species — what Aristotle calls secondary substance — is ultimately predicated of the individual man or horse. It is the individual man or horse that gives reality to the more universal notion of man or horse as a species. Aristotle's nominalism, his contention that the particular is what is ultimately real, is the foundation of his ontology and represents his rejection of the Platonic thesis that the forms constitute genuine being. Thus, Aristotle can say, when speaking of the primacy of individual substances, that if "the primary substances didn't exist, neither could any of the other things exist."[54] What is noticeable about Aristotle's account of substance is its implication that logic, particularly that of the proposition, is not here a purely tautological endeavour, but that it corresponds to the nature of things. The *Categories* is essentially a logical-metaphysical treatise. This correspondence between logic and metaphysics also finds expression in the philosophy of Leibniz. For now, it will be enough to consider the extent to which Leibniz works with the Aristotelian conception of substance.

Where Leibniz and Aristotle can be said to share common ground in their approach to substance is through their consideration of the logic of proposition or statement. We have already seen that for Aristotle, substance cannot be predicated of or inhere in any subject; it is the ultimate subject of predication. Further, it can be said that for Aristotle the properties of the subject are intrinsic to it, in the sense that substance as a genuine and actual entity has its 'potentialities' within it. Socrates can succumb to illness, get depressed, lose a limb, etc. — these are all inherent potentialities. For Leibniz, the properties of a substance are also intrinsic to it, but with a difference. The Leibnizian substance does not contain its properties as 'potentialities' in the Aristotelian sense. The properties of the Leibnizian substance are included within it in a completely determinate way. For instance, everything that *will* happen to Alexander the Great is contained in his 'complete notion'. All he will be subjected to, his every action, even the manner of his death are written into his nature. Leibniz makes it explicit that substance includes all of its predicates, as its nature is "to have a notion so complete that it is sufficient to include…all the predicates of the subject to which that notion is attributed."[55] These predicates cannot be said to be included in the (Aristotelian) sense of being mere unrestricted possibilities; rather, they are included in the sense of being determinate 'potentialities', all of which will of necessity be actualized at some point in time, and in a manner specified from all eternity. Thus, Leibniz is not as concerned to draw the distinction Aristotle does between what is said of a subject and what is in a subject. From the definition that Leibniz gives it would seem the distinction can be conflated. Everything that can be truly predicated of an individual substance inheres in its complete notion.

This concept of *in-esse*, of substance having its predicates included in it, is a crucial aspect of Leibniz's definition of substance. It is in fact that which constitutes its identity. Further, it is the basis of Leibniz's theory of judgement in which all truths stem from identity. Every true proposition, according to Leibniz, is in its essence a statement of identity; its predicate is either *expressly* or *virtually* contained in its subject. For example in propositions such as 'A is A' or 'the Pope is the head of the Roman Catholic Church' the predicate it expressly contained in its subject, the identity is clearly manifest. However, the identity is not manifest (at least to us) in many statements which are true. Propositions like 'I went travelling last year' or 'the Pope addresses the public with occasional speeches' would seem to express anything but identity. The 'I' in the first statement does not appear to be identical with 'went travelling last year'. Nevertheless, these statements, if true, conform to the theory of inclusion and can be reduced to identity. Their identity is not manifest but latent and known to that being capable of perfect wisdom. From this it follows that, aside from our perspective, all truths are *a priori* truths and one could say of God that he sees all truths as analytic truths. Leibniz goes on to distinguish between necessary and contingent truths.[56] Necessary truths or truths of reason are true independently of God's will, can be reduced to identity, and their opposite is impossible as they comply solely with the principle of non-contradiction. Contingent truths or truths of fact are based on the will of God, are infinitely reducible (to identities by God), and their opposite is possible since they arise from God's volition. What is of central importance though, is that all true statements are in essence statements of identity. That which pertains to truth pertains to identity, to unity.

Having considered Leibniz's views on the nature of truth with respect to the logic of statements, one can see that his interests take him beyond the self-contained realm of logic. More than a superb logician, Leibniz is deeply concerned with the reality of the world around him. Leibniz expresses

this himself when he states, in consideration of substance and its relation to predication, that "it is obvious that all true predication has some foundation in the nature of things…"[57] In his consideration of the ‘complete notion’ which is so named as its predicates are all contained within it, Leibniz attributes this to "the nature of an *individual substance* or a *complete being*"[58] and in effect suggests their identity. It would seem that for Leibniz the logical concept of the subject refers to the ontological-metaphysical subject — the individual substance. The subject of true statements corresponds with the completely real individual being. An assumption is undoubtedly being made here, namely that reality is ultimately structured according to some kind of logic. A thoroughgoing rationalist, Leibniz is a realist with respect to reason and rationality in the universe.

The nature of an individual substance receives perhaps its most complete and systematic treatment in Leibniz’s treatise *The Monadology*. It is here that we find Leibniz engaged in metaphysics in its broadest sense. The nature of all that exists, including everything that has been and all that ever will, is sought in the basic building blocks of reality, in the monad. All things for Leibniz are in a sense ‘made up’ of a plethora of individual monads. However, the way in which monads constitute the nature of things cannot be understood properly by means of spatial metaphor. For Leibniz, monads are completely simple beings, in the sense that they have no parts and admit of no division. Thus, they are unextended, shapeless, and ultimately unapproachable by means of spatial conception. That they "are the true atoms of nature" or "the elements of things" must be understood in a manner such that one does not succumb to thinking spatially, something Leibniz himself struggles with.

If substances are completely without parts it follows that they must begin or end all at once, for something entirely indivisible cannot be susceptible to gradual composition or disintegration. Such becoming or ceasing to be presupposes even more basic elements, which are precisely what Leibniz has ruled out. However, though they cannot be composed of different parts, monads certainly can form composites through aggregation. In fact, there is a sense in which it is because of the existence of composites that Leibniz has been led to the existence of monads, for it is his belief that "*where there are only entities though aggregation, there will not even be real entities*."[59] It is not possible for there to be composites without basic units of which they are composed, composites being "nothing but a collection, or aggregatum, of simples."[60] Here we can see the need for basic units arrived at due to logical considerations. An entity through aggregation receives its reality from its constituents, but if its constituents are based on aggregation themselves, the entity will have no reality and reduction will continue *ad infinitum*. Leibniz also holds to the view that ‘being’ and ‘unity’ are convertible terms: "that what is not truly *one* entity is not truly one*entity* either."[61] Reality as such must be determinate and lack of unity implies lack of determinacy. That which is fully determinate is the individual substance and not the being through aggregation. The latter is unified only in our minds, not in reality.

Continuing in his exposition of substance, Leibniz maintains that monads are causal and epistemological isolates as they cannot interact in the ordinary sense of the word; they admit of no extension or parts. Interaction would also violate the *in-esse*principle considered earlier. In addition to this, it is impossible for anything to penetrate a monad from the outside and all its accidents remain within. There is a sense in which talk about ‘outside’ or ‘within’ a monad can be misleading for they are not spatial entities. Nonetheless, the gist of the matter would seem to lie in their being subject only to strictly intrinsic, self-initiated change. Leibniz expresses this by saying that they "have no windows through which anything could come in or go out."[62] Their relationship with one another is due to the pre-established harmony that God has pre-ordained in his act of creation.

However, for us this harmony amongst all monads is experienced under the guise of efficient causation or constant conjunction among bodies. At a more fundamental level, nothing of the sort takes place, but rather the states of all monads are so perfectly harmonized by God that we experience things in a certain orderly fashion. What can be seen to follow from this is that for change to take place — which it does as we can't help but detect it — its stimulus must arise from within the individual monad itself. All change, based as it is on the change in each monad, comes "from an internal principle, since no external causes could ever have an influence into its interior."[63] With respect to its internal modifications, the monad must be causally self-sufficient. Now, change is by nature one of degree, in the sense that though something must change there must also be something that remains the same. Pure flux, without anything remaining constant throughout, would render change unintelligible. Thus, this principle of change must be sufficiently complex to allow for a "multiplicity within a unity."[64] Though the monad has no parts, it must be capable of some complexity in order for change to be possible. It is with this in mind that Leibniz seems to look to the human experience to clarify his position.

With the intention of explaining how monads can be entirely simple while at the same time admitting of a multifarious variety and a constantly changing nature, Leibniz presents us with two essential qualities of the monad. Each monad can be said to have an infinite number of states or relationships, and it these that are constantly in flux. These states that are constantly in flux are what Leibniz terms *perceptions*, each one of which in itself expresses a certain multiplicity within the unity that is the individual substance. But these perceptions are constantly changing, as has been noted already, due to an internal principle of change. Leibniz calls this internal principle, or to be more specific, the activity of this principle, which initiates the transition from one state to another, *appetition*. This is a crucial element of Leibniz's metaphysics. It is this internal and vital impulse enduring through change that accounts for a substance's identity, its unity. With these two characteristics, perception and appetition, Leibniz essentially exhausts the entire nature of the monad. This is the extent of that which "we can find within a simple substance, namely perceptions and their changes; and that is all that the internal actions of simple substances can consist in."[65]

Further exploration of the connection between substance and unity is in order. Equal consideration must also be given to the active nature or spontaneity which is characterized as essential to the monad. It is these three notions — substance, unity, and activity — which would seem to lurk at the heart of Leibniz's metaphysics. As Leibniz informs us:

But as for substances which possess in themselves a genuine, real, substantial unity, and which are capable of actions which can properly be called 'vital'…one can rightly say that they remain perfectly 'the same individual'…[66]

That which remains primordial and ultimately real through all change is in itself 'one' and it is 'one' in its being alive, in its being capable of activity.

Something also needs to be said here about the logic of identity which is found in Leibniz's philosophy. For anything to be 'one' in the fullest sense of the word, it must be distinct and thus distinguishable from everything else. >From the account that I have given so far, substances or monads would seem to be very much similar to one another. Each one is simple, active, and involved in the constant expression of its states. However, regardless of this resemblance, substances cannot share a perfect likeness with one another. If this were to be the case "there would

be no principle of individuation."[67] There would be nothing to tell them apart. For Leibniz, this would lead to the fact "that in such a case there would be no individual distinctness, no separate individuals."[68] This is what is known as ‘the identity of indiscernibles’. If two entities are perfectly alike in all their modifications, then it will no longer make sense to speak of them as ‘two’, because they will be in essence the same individual. Thus, for Leibniz each monad will differ from every other and this will be due to an internal difference, the only kind possible.

It has been said that it is the internal principle of a substance that accounts for its identity. It is not clear, however, precisely what this amounts to. In what sense does this principle confer identity? To answer this question — or at least to clarify his position — Leibniz turns to the one thing that seems to capture the phenomenon he is after, the human experience of selfhood. The ego is indeed the paradigm of a unity that allows for complexity, an active entity which is continually striving and representing. Since it is Leibniz’s contention that it is the "continuity and interconnection of perceptions which makes someone really the same individual"[69], the same can be said of all monads as the soul is but a monad accompanied by apperception or self-conciousness. (The soul is the ‘dominant’ monad in an intersection of monads constituting our body and accounts for our capacity to have knowledge of eternal truths. Such knowledge, in turn raises us to self-awareness. All monads participate in a continuum of consciousness in the sense that though they are not all strictly speaking like our minds they are qualitatively the same — simple substances with perception and appetition. Differences emerge with respect to their capacity for clarity and distinctness in their expressions. Hence, a graduated series of monads arises. Bare monads, which are confused in their perceptions occupy the lower end of the series while animal souls and then rational souls form the ascension towards God, the pinnacle of consciousness.) Leibniz goes on to stress the intelligibility of monads, especially their indivisible and yet complex nature through reference to the self:

We ourselves experience multiplicity in a simple substance when we find that the smallest perception we can apperceive incorporates some variety in its object. Thus everyone who accepts that the soul is a simple substance should accept this multiplicity in the monad…[70]

Leibniz’s reference to the ego or self leaves us to consider the persuasiveness of his position, and it does so by suggesting the contemplation of our own being, our own existence. Leibniz, however, is in no need of persuasion:

I, on the contrary, presuppose everywhere only that which all of us have to admit happens frequently enough in our soul, that is, intrinsic self-activated changes, and with this single presupposition of thought I exhaust the entire sum of things.[71]

Here we face a statement massive in its import. What this amounts to is a clear admission that the fundamental grounding of Leibniz’s metaphysics, the first principle which is in need of no further justification, is the notion of substance found through analogy to the self. Leibniz, much like his fellow rationalist Descartes, is working from an essentially subject-based metaphysic. Of course, Leibniz is ultimately led in a very different direction than Descartes, particularly in his view that reality is in its entirety fundamentally mental. Regardless, it is clear that Leibniz makes extensive reference to the self in order to explain what it is to be a substance. What is self-evidently true in

the *Cogito* becomes a basis on which to characterize the nature of all things. Both perception and appetition find their analogue in the 'I' of consciousness, something with which one is confronted at every moment. Thus, when we think of ourselves, "we think of being, of substance, of simples and composites, of the immaterial"[72]and in short of all those things which concern the metaphysician. What is also important about the statement quoted above is Leibniz's admission that "with this single presupposition I exhaust the entire sum of things." This makes it clear that everything in the universe can be understood to be active and alive in the same sense that we are. However, it must be noted that it is not our self-awareness or apperception which is attributed to all of reality, but rather our perceiving and willing. The capacity for apperception is unique to those monads called souls, and is not shared by all substances. Thus, one must be careful in interpreting the construal of Leibniz's philosophy as 'panpsychism', in the sense that 'panpsychism' should not be understood to mean that reality is made up of an infinite number of minds that possess the sort of intelligence we as rational beings do. It is only certain structures of our being, what Leibniz calls perception and appetition, which are shared by all things. This, however, does not detract from the uniformity of reality that Leibniz seems to be after.

Leibniz then, looks to the self to explain being, and as a result one is left with an understanding of substance that would seem to be self-evident. But to what extent can this be said to be true? Has Leibniz succeeded in transcending all critical scrutiny with his account of substance? It would seem that, in using the self as the paradigm of all reality, Leibniz explains the obscure by means of something equally obscure. At least this would seem to be so with respect to the ontological status of what is considered. For precisely what the 'I' is of which we are constantly aware remains an ambiguous notion. We *are* aware of perceiving things and our experience *is* continually changing from moment to moment, however, we can hardly pretend to understand our own nature with apodeictic certainty.

On the other hand, to ask for this kind of knowledge, especially where our own nature is concerned, would seem to be asking for too much. Perhaps it is to seek understanding of a sort all together incompatible with what we are investigating. However, though we cannot expect to have objective scientific knowledge of our inner experiences, there is a real sense in which we do lay claim to a direct and privileged access to our own minds, and as Descartes would have it, that we can know more of our own conscious being than we can of the external world. This is essentially the understanding with which Leibniz is also working. Concerning this kind of knowledge, we "can always say that the proposition*I exist* is evident in the highest degree, since it cannot be proved by anyone else — indeed that is an 'immediate truth'."[73] This sort of truth is unassailable, the simple fact of our thinking it rules out all possibility for doubt. It is not a necessary truth however, but a primitive truth of fact known by immediate inner experience, which is "immediate with the *immediacy of feeling*." The scope of this kind of truth is not confined to the thought of our thinking:

…not only is it immediately evident to me that *I think*, but it is just as evident that *I think various thoughts*…Thus the Cartesian principle is sound, but it is not the only one of its kind. [74]

The self certainty of our immediate presence to ourselves does not only apply to the thought that we think, but to all of our thoughts. That I exist is evident beyond doubt, but I am further aware of my existence as a unity. This awareness of unity within the self is articulated by McRae:

…since perception is the expression of a multiplicity in the unity of the perceiving subject, the awareness of the perception of something would include the awareness of the unity of the expression in the percipient.[75]

Consideration of the foregoing leads us to the conclusion that we experience ourselves as an *existing unity* and that this is known with the same certainty as matters of fact. From this we receive the general notion of substance as a unity. In light of this, it is not surprising that Leibniz elucidates his ontology through reference to the self. The experience of the self expresses those properties which he is looking for and which cannot be explained by extension, shape, and motion. What he could not find in the 'labyrinth of the continuum' is found in the 'I' of experience. There is a sense in which the extended world of matter, when conceived apart from active, formative principles, becomes essentially static and monistic. Experience, however, informs us otherwise.

One way of interpreting the Leibnizian conception of substance, and one which I think is helpful for understanding the overall scheme of his metaphysics, is through consideration of the one and the many. It is the reconciliation of this perennial problem that seems to inform many of the views Leibniz arrives at. Specifically, it is the notion of *multiplicity within a unity*that represents such a harmony between the two. It is not my intention to provide an interpretation of this ancient problem but to show how it can be seen to find expression in Leibniz's philosophy. I will give attention to three aspects of his metaphysics — perceptions, monads, and the universe (reality as a whole) — with the intention of showing how the one and the many can be seen as a fundamental concern for Leibniz.

We have already seen that perception is a state representing a great variety within the unity that is the individual substance. It is a single transitory state which amounts to a representation of "the composite, or of what is external, in the simple."[76] In the case of perception it is something material, divisible and instantiated in many different things which is captured through representation in something completely indivisible and by its nature a genuine unity. Both the one and the many, the composite and the simple, are brought together in this state of expression.

Something similar to what can be seen in the case of perception is also characteristic of the monad itself. Not only does the monad allow for the expression of a multitude in each one of its perceptions, but it is also infinitely complex in its continual process of unfolding, in its passage from one perception to another, while itself remaining a substantial unity. For each monad contains everything that has happened and will happen to it, that is to say, it possesses an infinite number of immanent modifications.

If the monad represents the microcosm, then the universe as macrocosm will express the same general scheme. Indeed, it is evident that for Leibniz, reality as a whole can be construed as both uniform and infinitely diverse. The universe is 'one' *qua* qualitative and harmonious totality and 'many' in its (ontological) variety. Though all substances differ infinitesimally in their perspectives, the difference is essentially one of degree and not of kind. All monads share perception and appetition and where they differ is in the degree of distinctness of their states. Even in death, the soul does not lose these qualities, but rather sinks into a sort of fog, it perceptions becoming confused and unclear.[77] In another sense the universe is also homogenous in its pre-established harmony. Everything is arranged by God in such a manner that however we as finite creatures may see things, no discordance or imperfection can come about. What we experience as unjust and

imperfect is due to our limited perspective and lack of appreciation for the infinite fullness of things. This harmony of all monads amounts to a unification of reality by means of which we experience a sensible order in the world. However, ontologically speaking, reality is the totality of an infinite number of discreet individual substances which are ontologically and causally entirely isolated from one another. Again, as was seen in the case of perception and in that of the monad, the one and the many are harmonized in the notion of a unity compensated by multiplicity.

This interpretation of Leibniz's metaphysics is also very much in agreement with his construal of substance as founded on the phenomena of self-experience. It is through introspection of his own nature that Leibniz has been able to find a foundation for a form of reconciliation between the one and the many. What he found there, which was not discoverable anywhere else, was a unity expressing a multiplicity. Thus, if my interpretation is correct, that the Leibnizian metaphysics has to some extent a spirit of reconciliation behind it, this would further substantiate the view that Leibniz found his conception of substance in the self.

That Leibniz arrives at his understanding of substance through self-examination is both implicitly and explicitly expressed in many passages. In drawing attention to our experience of ourselves, Leibniz provides us with more than mere clarification concerning the nature of substance. The brute fact that we *are* substantial unities makes possible the notion of substance in the first place. For Leibniz cannot conceive "how we could have the idea of being if we did not, as beings ourselves, find being within us."[78] Thus, having found the essence of substance, Leibniz, as was mentioned earlier, exhausts 'the entire sum of things'. There is no doubt that in Leibniz's mind the core of all things is uniform: "The foundations are everywhere the same; this is a fundamental maxim for me, which governs my whole philosophy."[79]

This is but one interpretation of many possible concerning Leibniz's account of substance, but there is evidence enough in the texts to suffice for its legitimacy. But just as the investigation into what substance is can be characterised as necessary in large part for the explanatory value of that which is found, so too is it this same value that I seek in the interpretation given.

Works Cited

Leibniz, Gottfried Wilheim. *Philosophical Text.* Ed & trans., R.S. Woolhouse & Richard Franks. Oxford University Press: New York. 1998.

Leibniz, Gottfried Wilheim. *New Essays on Human Understanding*. Ed. & trans., Peter Remnant & Jonathan Bennett. Cambridge University Press, 1996.

McRae, Robert. *Leibniz: Perception, Apperception, and Thought*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press. 1976.

Heidegger, Martin. *The Metaphysical Foundations of Logic*. Trans. Michael Heim. Bloomington: Indiana University Press. 1984.

Aristotle. *Selections.* Trans. Terence Irwin & Gail Fine. Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Co. 1995.