

# Did Leibniz Really Reject the Spinozistic Monism in 1677?

Shohei Edamura

## Introduction

In a letter to Jean Gallois of 1677, Leibniz stated as the following:

[I]l y en avoit une qui estoit adressée à M. Spinosa. Spinosa est mort cet hyver. Je l'ay veu en passant par la Hollande, et je luy ay parlé plusieurs fois et fort long temps. Il a une étrange Metaphysique, pleine de paradoxes. Entre autres il croit que le monde et Dieu n'est qu'une même chose en substance, que Dieu est la substance de toutes choses, et que les creatures ne sont que des Modes ou accidens. Mais j'ay remarqué que quelques demonstrations pretendues, qu'il m'a monstrées ne sont pas exactes. Il n'est pas si aisé qu'on pense, de donner des veritables demonstrations en metaphysique. Cependant il y en a et de tres belles. On n'en sc'auroit avoir avant que d'avoir establi de bonnes definitions qui sont rares. (A II i, 568)

Leibniz rejected some of the claims that he ascribed to Spinoza here. He rejected the view that the world and God do not substantially differ. Leibniz also did not admit that God is the substance of all the things, and creatures are merely modes or accidents. As he did in 1680s and later, Leibniz seems to hold a pluralistic metaphysics, according to which there are many finite substances created by God. However, Leibniz in fact was committed to the view that things do not substantially differ in *De Summa Rerum* of 1675-6. Leibniz stated that “all things are distinguished, not as substances (i.e., radically) but as modes,” and “all things are one” (A VI iii, 573 = DSR 93-5).

Now at a first glance, it seems that Leibniz changed his view in 1677, rejecting his view in DSR. But I found the discussions of other texts in 1677 are actually consistent with those of DSR. Therefore, I concede that though Leibniz may have started to feel uncomfortable in holding a monistic metaphysics in 1677, it seems that he did not have substantial tools to get over it. I will discuss four notable texts from 1677 to show that Leibniz did not drastically change his metaphysics in this year.

## 1. *Conversation with Steno Concerning Freedom*

The first text is *Conversation with Steno Concerning Freedom (here after Conversation)* of 7 December 1677, in which Leibniz discussed freedom and the principle of sufficient reason. Some commentators have mentioned to this text wondering if Leibniz committed an occasionalistic view, according to which human beings are not free in the sense that ordinary people understand. The following passage is most cited for discussing of

## Leibniz's view on freedom:

Properly and accurately speaking, the correct thing to say is not so much that God concurs in an action but rather that God produces the action. For let us suppose that God concurs in any given action but in such fashion that it is not produced by God alone but in part by the person. From this it follows that at least this particular concurrence of the person does not require the cooperation of God — which is contrary to our hypothesis. For that particular concurrence is also an act; therefore it follows in the end that all acts are produced in full by God, in the same way as are all creatures in the universe. He who twice produces half the thing produces the whole. Or, more accurately, he who produces half the thing, and in turn half of the remaining half, and in turn half of the remaining half of the half — to infinity — produces the whole. This takes place in any act whatsoever, according to God's manner of operation. For let us suppose that God and a person concur in some action; it is necessary that God concur with this very concurrence of the person, and either it will proceed to infinity (nevertheless it will not any the less reduce to the same thing) or it will suffice to say right from the start that God actually produces the action, even if it is the person who acts. (A VI iv, 1382 = CP 127)

The most important point of the passage is that Leibniz denied the concurrence of God. God himself produces an action of a human being. It seems that a human being actually does not have a power to produce his action. Similarly, Malebranche argued that human minds are inefficacious and cannot move their bodies for actions. Even if we feel that our wills cause the movements of our bodies, they actually do not cause these movements. Malebranche also supposes that human minds cannot produce future states, and God acts upon human minds to actualize their future states. It seems that Leibniz's view in the passage is fairly close to Malebranche's occasionalism.

I think Leibniz's occasionalistic view here is consistent with what Leibniz argued in DSR. He argued that things do not substantially differ, suggesting that God is the only substance. The passage of *Conversation* suggests that human beings are causally inefficacious, and this claim implies that human beings are not substances if being able to act is a necessary condition of substance.

However, Laerke argues *Conversation* show some development of Leibniz's metaphysics from 1675-6, since Leibniz's discussion of the nature of liberty in the letter suggests that Leibniz started to keep a "distance in relation to the Spinozistic unisubstantianism" (Laerke 2008, p. 562). Laerke points out that in the letter, Leibniz goes on to say that "all things have a reason, either in themselves and from terms, such as what is necessary per se, i.e., through itself, or from another source, such as what is free and contingent, or, as I shall say, per accidens or necessary based on a hypothesis" (CP 123 = A VI iv, 1380; Laerke 2008, p. 826). Laerke argues for Leibniz, God's

intellect grasps all the series of possibles, and not all of them are actual entities, which has a tension with Spinoza's view that all possible things actually exist. Laerke argues further that "Leibniz already started to conceive the benefits of his new ontology of possible from 1677" (Laerke 2008, p. 797).

Let us see the passages which Laerke refers to:

Whatever is, either is per se, i.e., exists through itself, or per aliud, i.e., exists through another. If it is per se, then the reason for its existence is derived from its own nature, i.e., its essence contains existence. This holds in all truths that can be demonstrated on the basis of terms or whose contrary implies a contradiction. If something is per aliud, then it has the reason for its existence outside itself, i.e., it has a cause. Therefore, all things have a reason, either in themselves and from terms, such as what is necessary <per se, i.e., through itself>, or from another source, such as what is free and contingent, or, as I shall say, per accidens or necessary based on a hypothesis. (A VI iv, 1380 = CP 123)

This passage is worth considering since it suggests that there are two kinds of existing things. Some thing exists through itself, and does not need others. Some exist through another, and it is ontologically dependent upon it. If this passage is showing that contingent things are also substances, it clearly introduces a pluralistic metaphysics different from DSR's. But in the passage, Leibniz did not explicitly take them as substances, and I don't think it is evidence to show a drastic shift to a pluralistic metaphysics.

Perhaps Laerke suggests that Leibniz took finite things as substances in the passage since their existence is not necessary, but contingent. This point is relevant to Laerke's interpretation that Leibniz's system of DSR has some worry of necessitarianism, and Leibniz in fact could not establish that actual finite things contingently exist. But I don't think Leibniz's monistic view of DSR entails that he held a necessitarian view. And if Leibniz believed that finite things contingently exist in the period of DSR, the passage of *Conversation* does not show that he started to believe that finite things are substances.

Another distinguished commentator does not claim that *Conversation* shows that Leibniz introduced a new ontology, but his interpretation may look suggesting it. Sukjae Lee does not take *Conversation* as presenting an occasionalistic view. It seems that in his reading the metaphysics of *Conversation* is not substantially different from that of the middle years, which suggests that it is remarkably different from that of DSR. He quotes the following passage:

[I]f God does not penetrate [influit] into the substance of a freeact, i.e., if He does not cooperate in every free act, it follows that God is not the first cause of all created entities. And that is actually to remove God from

things. Since a free act is a created entity, it must acquire its own existence from God. (A VI iv, 1381; Lee 2009, p. 115)

Lee argues that the passage does not imply that Leibniz committed an occasionalistic view:

This statement, though relevant to divine and creaturely causation, doesn't decide the issue just mentioned either way, since it simply states a minimal requirement for those who hold that God is the first cause of everything in nature: divine causal activity is directly and immediately present in every state of affairs. And this, as we have seen, is a view common to both the concurrentist and occasionalist. (Lee 2009, p. 115)

Indeed, in the passage, Leibniz certainly implies that God is required as the first cause of all created entities, and He "cooperates" with creatures. Every time a human being acts, He needs to cooperate. But this expression suggests that Leibniz was a concurrentist rather than an occasionalist. According to the concurrentist view, human beings have capacities to act, and make decisions spontaneously. But human beings need God's cooperation for acting at any moment. Now in the quoted passage, Leibniz argued that God is the first cause of created things (including human beings), and a free act needs God's existence. Both points are, I think, accepted by concurrentists. They suppose that God created human beings and other things, and without His creation human beings cannot act. Since the second point merely implies that a free act will not be given without God's creation, it does not imply an occasionalistic view.

However, I think the passage which I quoted above strongly suggests that Leibniz had an occasionalistic view. Let us see an important part again:

Properly and accurately speaking, the correct thing to say is not so much that God concurs in an action but rather that God produces the action... [I]t will suffice to say right from the start that God actually produces the action, even if it is the person who acts. (A VI iv, 1382 = CP 127)

Obviously, the concurrentist view was denied here, since properly speaking, God does not concur in an action of a human being. Rather, God directly produces a human action even if human beings seemingly act by themselves. This is a strong claim, and I think it shows that Leibniz committed an occasionalism in 1677.

## 2. *What is an Idea?*

The second text is *What is an Idea?*, which may seem to suggest that Leibniz started to hold a new metaphysics in 1677. *What is an Idea?* once was understood to have written in 1678 by Leroy E. Loemker, but recently scholars take it as written in 1677. Leibniz's discussion of idea in this text attracted interests of many

scholars. Especially, they have tried to understand some influence from Spinoza to Leibniz considering this text. To be sure, we do not find discussions of substance as such in *What is an Idea?*. But according to Laerke, the discussion of idea in this text suggests that an idea exists in a human mind, which is a substance in its own right. If so, Leibniz's metaphysics in this text is remarkably different from that of DSR. Let us see a passage in which Leibniz stated that an idea is in a mind:

First of all, by the term *idea* we understand *something which is in our mind*. Traces impressed on the brain are therefore not ideas, for I take it as certain that the mind is something other than the brain or a more subtle part of the brain substance.

There are many things in our mind, however, which we know are not ideas, though they would not occur without ideas – for example, thoughts, perceptions, and affections. In my opinion, namely, *an idea consists, not in some act, but in the faculty of thinking*, and we are said to have an idea of a thing even if we do not think of it, if only, on a given occasion, we can think of it. (L 207)

This passage seems to have several implications. But most importantly, it implies that an idea is in a human mind. This suggests that an idea itself is not identical to a human mind. Since Spinoza states that a human mind is the idea of its body, Leibniz seems to keep a distance from Spinoza's metaphysics here. However, Leibniz actually denied that a human mind is the idea of its body in DSR. So, even if Leibniz denied that human minds are ideas in *What is an Idea?*, it does not show that Leibniz changed his view in 1677.

Laerke, however, takes note of another passage of *What is an Idea?*, and argues that Leibniz committed a doctrine of representation, which implies that objects are really distinct from perceiving human minds. For him, the doctrine of representation is not consistent with the Spinozistic monism, and the quasi-spinozistic system of DSR.

The most famous example is probably *What is an Idea?* in which Leibniz explains his “projective” concept of the idea and his theory of expression for the first time, and perhaps it is against the spinozistic theory of the idea. (Laerke 2008, p. 561)

According to Laerke, Leibniz introduced the projective concept of idea here. According to Leibniz's theory, human minds have ideas, and they project these ideas to external things. Laerke argues that this theory is not consistent with Spinoza's system, in which the relation of expression is immanent. For Spinoza, all the finite things are immanent for God. So, ideas are immanent for God, as modifications of his attribute of extension. If two things are immanent for the one and the same being (namely God), they are not external to each other. So, other things are not completely external for an idea. And a human mind does not have to “project” an idea to express another thing.

Laerke also suggests that Leibniz changed his view in 1677, since Leibniz committed a quasi-spinozistic system of DSR, which is not consistent with the projective theory of expression.

But I think that *What is an Idea?* does not show that in 1677 Leibniz got out of his system of DSR. Laerke claims that Leibniz introduces a doctrine of expression as representation in *What is an Idea?*. Let us see a passage in which Leibniz showed the doctrine.

Hence there must be something in me which not merely leads me to the thing but also express it. That is said to express a thing in which there are relations [habitudines] which correspond to the relations of the thing expressed. (L 207)

An implication of the passage is that A expresses B when A's features correspond to B's. It does not imply that A and B are really distinct, and they are different substances. The implication of the passage seems to be very general, and not be limited for the relation of representation between human minds and external substances. The passage suggests that human minds express or represent objects through ideas in the minds, but represented objects are not necessarily substances that are distinct from human minds. Even if we accept that a human mind and a perceived object are distinct as modifications, not as substances, we can still find a general relationship of expression or correspondence.

### **3. *On a Method of Arriving at a True Analysis of Bodies and the Causes of Natural Things***

*On a Method of Arriving at a True Analysis of Bodies and the Causes of Natural Things* (here after *On a Method*) may seem to suggest that for Leibniz bodies are substances, and this text shows Leibniz committed a pluralistic metaphysics in 1677. But again, I think it can be read in the context of the monistic metaphysics of DSR. *On a Method* of May 1677 deals with a method of analysis, which is relevant to Leibniz's logic and philosophy of science, but it also addresses the ontological status of bodies. After discussing various types of ingredients of bodies (flesh, blood, fire, air, earth, etc.) and various types of experiments, which are also related to chemistry, Leibniz stated as the following:

I believe there is no medium more effective than taste for discerning the essential nature of bodies, because taste brings bodies to us in their substance and dissolves them in us so that we may perceive the whole solution closely. (L 175)

“Substance” seems to be equivalent to the “essential nature” of bodies. Here some readers may think that each body has its own substance, and two bodies are really or substantially distinct. If it is the case, then certainly Leibniz committed a pluralism of metaphysics, according to which there are many substances, and God is not the

only one, which seems to be inconsistent with what he held in DSR.

However, I find a reason to doubt that Leibniz held a pluralistic metaphysics here. Leibniz did not use the plural case “substances” in the passage. He did not explicitly suggest that there are many substances by using this expression. The passage just suggests that tastes of bodies are “in their substance.” This claim is consistent with the view that bodies are modifications, and their substance is the only substance, namely God. So, I do not think that Leibniz meant that each body has its metaphysical essence, and because of it bodies are substantially distinct.

#### 4. Letters to Arnold Eckhard

Lastly, I discuss letters to Arnold Eckhard, which may look suggesting that mind and body are substances, as Descartes said. But I don't think the letters show Leibniz held a pluralistic metaphysics in 1677. Leibniz exchanged letters with the Cartesian philosopher Eckhard concerning God's existence. Though these letters are interesting from a theological point of view, they also have substantial discussions of the ontological statuses of substance, mind, and body. In a letter of Summer 1677 Leibniz sent a summary of Eckhard's views on the perfect being, mind, and body:

(6) Nothing more is even required for a most perfect being, you add, than that it be a most perfect mind, that is, a mind to which belong all the perfections which are found in any mind. For every substance is either mind or body; but a being which determines itself is not a body, therefore it will be a mind. (L 178)

So, according to what Leibniz ascribed to Eckhard, there is no substance other than mind and body. If there is something other than one of these, it is not a substance. Moreover, mind is understood to have some power to determine itself. It seems that mind is not causally inefficacious. After paraphrasing Eckhard's view, Leibniz made some comment:

To (6): this assumes without proof that all substance is either mind or body. But this is not certain, even though we may never have thought of any other substance. For perhaps there can be others of which we can no more think than a blind man thinks of colors. To prove that a mind which understands all things and wills most perfectly or is omnipotent does not imply a contradiction, you make use of the same paralogism which you use above, if I am not mistaken, namely, that non-understanding is oppose to understanding, but that to understand everything at one and always is not. (L 179)

Leibniz seems to take an agnostic view here. Leibniz did not explicitly deny that body is a substance. For sure, Leibniz made a critical comment upon the view that any substance is either mind or body. But Leibniz seems

to suggest that there may be a substance that is neither mind, nor body. One problem is that Leibniz's view on mind and body is not completely clear here. He did not explicitly commit the view that minds and bodies are substances. But certainly, he did not deny that they are. Moreover, Leibniz's statement that "we may never have thought of any other substance" suggests that though we have never thought of something other than mind and body as substance, at least mind and body are substances.

However, Leibniz may have compromised with Eckhard to some extent. Eckhard was a Cartesian, and according to Descartes' metaphysics both mind and body are substances. If Leibniz had denied that body is a substance, Eckhard would oppose to him. This would cause needless debates. For the purpose of focusing upon issues of God's existence, Leibniz may have avoided to deny that body is a substance.

## 5. Summary

We have found some passages from the texts of 1677 that may seem to suggest that Leibniz had adopted a new metaphysics with respect to the metaphysics of DSR. But the passages actually do not show that Leibniz drastically changed his view. It is true that Leibniz did not explicitly state that things are modifications and they are not substances in the texts which we have examined. But it is possible that he still believed that creatures are different as modifications, but not as substances.

Given the passage from the letter to Gallois, for sure, we may be inclined to interpret the letter as evidence that Leibniz started to hold a new metaphysics. But since the letter only contains short critical notes on Spinoza, it does not provide any evidence to explain Leibniz's new metaphysics. Perhaps for some reason (for instance, for a political reason), Leibniz gave a critical note upon Spinoza's view in the letter to Gallois.

## Abbreviations

- A = *G. W. Leibniz: Sämtliche Schriften und Briefe*, edited by the Deutsche Akademie der Wissenschaften. Darmstadt/Leipzig/Berlin: Akademie Verlag, 1923-. Cited by series, volume, and page.
- CP = *G. W. Leibniz. Confessio Philosophi*, translated by R. Sleight Jr. and B. Look. New Haven: Yale University Press, 2005.
- DSR = *G. W. Leibniz. De Summa Rerum*, translated by G.H.R. Parkinson. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1992.
- Ethics = *B. Spinoza: Ethics*, cited by book and axiom (A), definition (D), or proposition (P), followed by a page number from *A Spinoza Reader: The Ethics and Other Works*, ed. and trans. by Edwin Curley, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1994.
- L = *G. W. Leibniz. Philosophical Papers and Letters*, trans. and ed. by Leroy E. Loemker. 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. Dordrecht and Boston: Reidel, 1969.

## References

- Adams, Robert Merrihew. 1994. *Leibniz: Determinist, Theist, Idealist*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Laerke, Mogens. 2008. *Leibniz lecteur de Spinoza*. Paris: Honoré Champion.
- Lee, Sukjae. 2009. "Leibniz, Divine Concurrence, and Occasionalism in 1677." In M. Laerke and D. Snyder eds. *The Philosophy of the Young Leibniz. Studia Leibnitiana Sonderhefte Band 35*, pp. 111-120.

[Kanazawa Seiryō University, Associate Professor]