

Why Leibniz Thinks Descartes Was Wrong and the Scholastics Were Right

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Abstract: Leibniz believes that if there are bodies, they are not essentially merely extended because they have substantial forms. He also believes there are substantial forms. In the Arnauld correspondence, at least, he believes there is a close connection between these claims. What's the connection? Realism about bodies is the obvious answer. I argue that the obvious answer is wrong; Leibniz has other, better, non-realist ways of connecting the two. These ways of doing so support agnosticism about realism and idealism and support that the Cartesian conception of mind is as faulty, and for similar reasons, as the Cartesian conception of body.

Leibniz believes

DESCARTES WAS WRONG (DWW)—If there are bodies, they are not essentially merely extended. If there are bodies, they have substantial forms.

He also believes

THE SCHOLASTICS WERE RIGHT (SWR)—There are substantial forms.

And, during the Arnauld correspondence, at least, he believes that there is a close connection between these two theses.¹ Why would Leibniz think there is this close connection? An obvious answer: he believes there are bodies and, together with DWW, that implies SWR. The obvious answer, then, has a significant consequence for the interpretation of Leibniz: he is a realist about bodies. For those who think Leibniz was during the Arnauld correspondence an idealist, the obvious answer is unacceptable. If so, what did Leibniz think connected DWW and SWR?

¹ Four texts stand out in support of Leibniz thinking there is a close connection between the two theses. See G II: 58/LA: 66 where Leibniz starts with DWW and ends up agreeing with SWR. See G II: 124/LA: 158-159 where Leibniz starts with DWW then says “when” not “if” you admit that there are forms, various theses follow. See, too, G II: 65-67/LA: 78-81 where Arnauld interprets Leibniz as holding DWW, but then asks a bunch of questions about SWR as if holding DWW commits you to SWR. Finally, see G II: 106/LA: 133 where Arnauld writes, “I have more to say about these...substantial forms which you think must be conceded to exist...because otherwise matter would not be a unity.” This sentence not only attributes a close connection to DWW and SWR but, also, endorses Levey's view that Leibniz moves from DWW to SWR via the claim that there are bodies. Of course, the last two texts cited come from Arnauld, but Leibniz never contests Arnauld's view of these points.

In what follows, I make the connection in terms an idealist can accept. Along the way, I rebut two recent, excellent arguments by Samuel Levey for Leibniz's realism in the Arnauld correspondence.²

The upshots are as follows. The idealist-friendly interpretation is plausible and can be defended from Levey's arguments. But that interpretation is not particularly *supportive* of idealism. Agnosticism about realism and idealism is promising. The idealist-friendly way of connecting DWW and SWR is in another, more startling, way important: it implies that the Cartesian conception of minds as mere thinking things is, like the Cartesian conception of body, faulty and for similar reasons. Leibniz thought Descartes was even more wrong than he let on.

1

First, some terminology.

Let idealism be the view that there are simple substances, all to some degree mind-like, and there are no other substances. In particular, there are no bodies. By 'body' I mostly mean 'bodily substance'—it will be clear from context when I don't.

Let weak realism be the view that there are simple substances, all to some degree mind-like, and there are substances—bodies—that are united collections of such substances, and there are no other substances.

Let strong realism be the view that there are simple substances, all to some degree mind-like, and there are substances—bodies—that are at least partly hunks of extension.³

² See Levey (2003) and (2007). I focus on the former, and all page numbers refer to that paper unless otherwise noted.

³ The 'weak'/'strong' terminology comes from Daniel Garber. I use it slightly differently than he does.

I have defined strong realism so that it leaves open whether a substance might be wholly a hunk of extension. Descartes thinks there are such substances. If Leibniz is a strong realist, he thinks only hunks of extension plus substantial forms are substances. So Leibniz rejects, what Descartes accepts, that there are some bodily substances and these substances are essentially merely extended: if a substance were essentially merely extended, it couldn't have a form. At issue in the debate about Leibniz and idealism and realism is how much else of Descartes's view Leibniz rejects: is Descartes right that there are some bodily substances? If so, is Descartes right that they are partly hunks of extension?

2

My taxonomy leaves out positions according to which some mind-like substances are not simple. The taxonomy also leaves open the relation between extension and force (on which see Garber (1985) and Garber (1992)). The taxonomy also considerably simplifies idealism. For a much more nuanced account see Rutherford (2007). A second-last simplification: I ignore the possibility that Leibniz is, for some of the Arnauld correspondence, an external world skeptic. Of course, if he is an external world skeptic, he is not a realist—weak and strong realism commit to an extramental world—so skepticism is supportive of a main point of the paper. The role of external world skepticism in Leibniz's skepticism about bodies is interesting but tangential to my arguments. For the purposes of this paper, I don't think the simplifications matter.

A final simplification is mentioned in footnote five.

The realist interpretation of Leibniz holds his answers are ‘yes’ and ‘yes’.⁴ Defending this, Levey makes two arguments: first, close analysis of an important letter implies it and, second, only realism can explain the connection between

DESCARTES WAS WRONG—If there are bodies, they are not essentially merely extended. If there are bodies, they have substantial forms
and

THE SCHOLASTICS WERE RIGHT—There are substantial forms.

I reject both arguments. Mostly, I focus on the second, but I fill some space on the first because what is wrong with it supports, I believe, what is wrong with the second. The non-realist reading of the text Levey focuses on supports a non-realist way of connecting DWW to SWR. And what is wrong with both arguments supports agnosticism about realism and idealism.⁵

Levey argues that in an unsent draft of the 28 November/8 December 1686 letter to Arnauld, Leibniz out and asserts realism. That realism is then used, along with DWW, to get to SWR, a thesis Leibniz wouldn’t give up. What’s more, Levey believes, that

⁴ I assume that Levey thinks the relevant bit of the Leibniz-Arnauld correspondence shows that Leibniz is a strong realist (see Levey (2003): 245, 269, 270, 271 fn. 3). Because I focus on strong realism, when I use ‘body’ I mostly mean ‘substance that is partly a hunk of extension’. It is clear from context when I don’t. However, I argue that the text implies neither strong nor weak realism.

⁵ A final simplification: I focus almost exclusively on Levey’s views as exemplars of the realist interpretation of Leibniz. Why?

Although there is a massive literature on realism vs. idealism in the Arnauld correspondence and the issues are many, this paper focuses on one part of the wider issue: the connection between DWW and SWR. As far as I know, the argument that only realism can explain the connection was introduced by Levey and has never been discussed, though there is a hint of discussion in Sleight (1990). The main thesis of the paper is that there is an idealist-friendly, non-realist way of making the connection.

A subsidiary thesis of the paper is that the key passage Levey focuses on contains no commitment to realism, and is actually better interpreted in idealist-friendly, non-realist terms. The non-realist interpretation of the passage is just what you would expect, given the non-realist way of connecting DWW and SWR.

Of course, I cannot attempt here—anywhere—to resolve the realism/idealism dispute in general. But seeing how DWW connects to SWR sheds light on that debate, and on Leibniz’s criticisms of both of the Cartesian conception of mind and body. I believe it also sheds light on textual interpretation of Leibniz in C.D. Broad, Daniel Garber, Glenn Hartz, and others; I make the case for that view elsewhere (see [deleted]).

route to SWR is never repudiated and is one of Leibniz's best argument for forms.⁶ So if the realist interpretation of the draft to Arnauld is correct, then Leibniz was a realist at least during some of the Arnauld correspondence. If Leibniz uses that realism to get to forms and never gives the route up, then that shows something about the later Leibniz, too: even then Leibniz was a realist about bodies since realism is crucial to an argument for forms. Idealism even in the late years would be a non-starter. Hence, it matters—a lot—if the realist reading is right.

In the draft of the 28 November/8 December 1686 letter, Leibniz writes,

Once [that bodies are substances] is granted, I believe one can infer that bodily substance does not consist of extension or divisibility; for it will be conceded that two bodies set apart from one another, for instance two triangles, are not really one substance; let us now assume that they come together to make up a square, will the mere fact of their contiguity turn them into one substance? I do not think so. Now, each extended mass can be considered as composed of two or a thousand others; there exists only an extension achieved through contiguity. Thus one will never find a body of which it may be said that it is truly one substance. (G II: 71-72/LA: 88)

Call the passage 'the two triangles passage' and the argument it contains 'the two triangles argument.' Levey's realist interpretation of the two triangles argument is:

- (R1) Some bodies are substances.
- (R2) Every body is essentially merely extended.
- (R3) Every body is composed of two or more bodies.
- (R4) Anything composed of two or more bodies is a substance only if its parts form a single substance. Therefore,
- (R5) Any body is a substance only if its parts form a single substance.
- (R6) The parts of anything that is essentially merely extended form a single substance only if many bodies can form a single substance in virtue of contact.
- (R7) It is not the case that many bodies can form a substance in virtue of contact. Therefore,
- (R8) For nothing that is essentially merely extended is it the case that its parts form a single substance. Therefore,

⁶ Levey notes this in Levey (2003): 270, then defends it at some length in his (2007).

(R9) For no body is it the case that its parts form a single substance.
Therefore,
(R10) No body is a substance. Therefore,
(R11) Some bodies are substances and no body is a substance. (271-272,
fn. 7; I have replaced ‘consists solely of extension’ with ‘is essentially
merely extended’)

(R11) is a contradiction. The argument is valid, so at least one of its premises must be false. Leibniz rejects (R2), Levey thinks, and only (R2). The significance for realism is clear. Leibniz accepts (R1), so he accepts the controversial bit of realism, namely, that there are bodily substances.⁷ This is remarkable. If the realist interpretation of Leibniz’s argument is correct, Leibniz quite clearly asserts realism. What is more, from the first line of the two triangles passage, it is clear that Leibniz holds that if bodies are substances, they are not essentially merely extended and clear from surrounding passages that if bodies are substances, then they have a substantial form.⁸ So from the two triangles passage, DWW follows. Finally, if the realist interpretation of the two triangles argument is right, there is no problem explaining why Leibniz thinks there is a close connection between DWW and SWR: DWW and (SL1) imply it.⁹

3

⁷ I defined realism so that it is bipartite: there are mind-like substances and bodies. Since it is common to realism and idealism that there are mind-like substances, in what follows I claim that establishing that there are bodies suffices for establishing realism even though, as I have defined it, realism also requires the existence of mind-like substances.

⁸ “From [the two triangles argument] it follows that the substance of a body, if bodies have one, must be indivisible; whether it is called soul or form does not concern me.” (G II: 72/LA: 88)

⁹ At least one brilliant scholar believes that Levey is right about Leibniz and realism and how Leibniz connects DWW to SWR. Arnauld repeatedly imputes realism to Leibniz in the correspondence and twice says that Leibniz connects DWW to SWR via realism. See G II: 85/LA: 106 and G II: 106/LA: 133. Also, in his 28 September 1686 letter, Arnauld raises seven questions about DWW, three of which presuppose that Leibniz hold realism, as if the two have to go together.

Donald Baxter and Robert Sleigh would think Levey is wrong, but I agree with Levey that his interpretation of the two triangles argument is more faithful to the two triangles passage than Baxter’s or Sleigh’s. (Note that Sleigh’s interpretation is of an argument common to the two triangles passage and others.) See Baxter (1995) and Sleigh (1990) and Levey ((2003): 275, fn. 38) for discussion of them.

In one very important way, Levey's realist interpretation rings untrue. The realist interpretation depends on Leibniz asserting that there are bodies. Levey thinks that other commentators have missed that premise and, so, have missed the significance of Leibniz's argument. But the reason other commentators have missed the premise, I think, is because elsewhere in the correspondence Leibniz goes out of his way *not* to assert it. For example, in the letter of 4/14 July 1686, Leibniz writes,

If the body is a substance and not a simple phenomenon like the rainbow, nor an entity united by accident or aggregation like a heap of stones, it cannot consist of extension, and one must necessarily conceive of something there that one calls substantial form, and which corresponds in a way to the soul. (G II: 58/LA: 66; my emphasis)

Arnauld responded with seven questions about this sentence. In an unsent draft of a reply, just before the two triangles passage, Leibniz writes,

The other difficulty is incomparably greater, concerning substantial forms and the souls of bodies; and I confess that I am not satisfied about it. In the first place, one would have to be sure that bodies are substances and not merely true phenomena like the rainbow. (G II: 71/LA: 88; my emphasis)

I read this not as a hedge about exactly his degree of confidence that bodies are substances—is he 90% sure? 95%—but, rather, as a hedge about whether bodies are substances. Leibniz is claiming that Arnauld's questions about forms and bodies are pressing only if there are bodies. And Leibniz then stops short of claiming there are. If he thinks there are bodies, this is a needless bit of caution. He might as well have said, "In the second place, one would have to be sure there are any substances at all. And in the third place, one would have to be sure that the rainbow is a true phenomenon." The non-realist reading of the passage—that Leibniz is hedging about whether bodies are substances—is supported by a line just after the two triangles passage. Leibniz writes,

“the substance of a body, *if bodies have one*, must be indivisible.” (G II: 72/LA: 88; my emphasis) A few lines later, he writes, “*If* bodies have substantial forms, for instance if animals have souls, then these souls are indivisible.” (G II: 72/LA: 89; my emphasis) It is clear that Leibniz thinks that if there are bodies, they have forms, so the line is best read as a hedge about whether there are bodies at all. On this non-realist reading, Leibniz says that if certain things—for instance, rabbits—are substances, then they have substantial forms, and, if so, those forms are indivisible. If he goes for realism, the sentence should go, “There are bodies, and their forms are indivisible.” So there is strong reason to doubt that Leibniz asserts

(R1) Some bodies are substances:

he hedges about it all around the two triangles passage.

There is a different way to interpret Leibniz’s hedging. Consider what Levey says about the “one would have to be sure that bodies are substances and not...phenomena” passage—it generalizes to the other examples I cited:

Leibniz admits that the difficulty in mounting a solid defense of his postulation of forms is very great, and he says, “I confess I am not satisfied about it.” *Pressed to say just what bodies have forms, and so are substances*, Leibniz admits that he cannot be certain “whether bodies are substances and not merely true phenomena like the rainbow.” This is a concession to skepticism, though not to Cartesian worries about the very existence of any external world at all. As we shall see below, Leibniz’s skepticism is more limited: what he acknowledges is that *he cannot be certain just which bodies possess substantial forms* and which do not. (247; my emphases)

Levey reads the passages quoted above not as hedges about *whether* bodies are substances but only hedges about *which* bodies are substances. This seems to contort what Leibniz says in the passages quoted above. I fuss just about three. First, the most natural reading of “one would have to be sure that bodies are substances” is “one would

have to be sure *whether* bodies are substances” and not “one would have to be sure *which* bodies are substances.”

Second, when Leibniz writes, “if the body is a substance and not a phenomenon...it cannot consist of extension,” the realist might take him to say, essentially, “I don’t know which bodies are substances. But for each one, if it is a substance, it doesn’t consist of extension.” If Leibniz is hedging here about *which* bodies are substances, doing so is just a distraction, drawing attention to his ignorance of a thesis irrelevant to what bodies are like. And if Leibniz goes for realism, using the conditional is needlessly weak. He should just say, “Bodies are substances. Therefore, body does not consist in extension.”

Finally, most importantly, Leibniz writes,

In the first place, one would have to be sure that bodies are substances and not merely true phenomena...But once that is granted, I believe one can infer that bodily substance does not consist of extension...(G II: 71-72/LA: 88)

Levey’s realist interpretation reads Leibniz as noting in the first sentence that he is unsure *which* bodies are substances. Then, in the second sentence he asserts (R1), that bodies are substances. But what Leibniz is granting in the second sentence is whatever he is agnostic about in the first: “once *that* is granted.” So if the realist interpretation is right about what Leibniz is hedging about in the first sentence, it is wrong about what Leibniz is asserting in the second. In the second sentence, according to the realist, Leibniz should be granting just which bodies are substances. But that is much more than the realist interpretation of the argument needs. It doesn’t need to have sorted out whether that bunny is a substance or that diamond is. What the realist interpretation needs is just that *some* body is a substance. On the realist interpretation, Leibniz botches his own

argument. He grants a premise he is unsure about—which bodies are substances—when all he needs is a premise realists think he believes—that some bodies are substances.

I will not argue for this here, but I believe the two triangles passage and its surroundings are, with respect to realism, a microcosm of the Arnauld correspondence. Leibniz says various things supportive of realism. Realist interpretations fasten on those. He says various things that are unsupportive of it. Non-realist interpretations fasten on those. The presence of the quotations unsupportive of realism *do not* suffice to show that Leibniz goes for idealism, *do* suffice to show he does not go for realism. I come back to this point.

4

I have argued that there is reason to resist (R1)-(R11) as the best account of the two triangles argument. So so far I have left open what is going on in the two triangles passage. Again, it goes:

Once [that bodies are substances] is granted, I believe one can infer that bodily substance does not consist of extension or divisibility; for it will be conceded that two bodies set apart from one another, for instance two triangles, are not really one substance; let us now assume that they come together to make up a square, will the mere fact of their contiguity turn them into one substance? I do not think so. Now, each extended mass can be considered as composed of two or a thousand others; there exists only an extension achieved through contiguity. Thus one will never find a body of which it may be said that it is truly one substance. (G II: 71-72/LA: 88)

I endorse this non-realist interpretation of the argument:

(N1) If bodies are essentially merely extended, then each body is composed of at least two other bodies.
(N2) This composition comes from touching and only from touching.
Therefore,

- (N3) If bodies are essentially merely extended, then two such bodies touching and only two such hunks touching compose something.
(N4) Touching does not suffice for composing a substance. Therefore,
(N5) It is not the case that bodies are substances and that each is essentially merely extended. Therefore,
(N6) If bodies are substances, their essence is not merely extension.

If the realist interpretation of the two triangles argument is right, Leibniz is a realist. If the non-realist interpretation is, this is left open.

The strengths of the non-realist reading are as follows. First, it is a good fit with the text. It reads the passage as stating its conclusion first—if bodies are substances, then they aren't essentially merely extended—then arguing for it—that's the force of the 'for' after the first semicolon. (N1) captures "Every extended mass can be considered as composed of two, or a thousand, others." (N2) is implicit in "you will grant me that two bodies which are at a distance...are not really one substance" plus Leibniz never considering a way besides touching that bodies could make a substance. (N4) captures "can merely being in contact make [two things] into one substance? I don't think so."

Second, the non-realist reading allows Leibniz's hedging about whether bodies are substances to be taken at face value since my argument does not use the premise that some bodies are substances. This points to the two significant differences between the realist and non-realist readings: each has Leibniz *saying* that bodies are substances, but the non-realist has him putting that claim in the antecedent of a conditional rather than asserting it. Also, the non-realist has that conditional as the conclusion of the two triangles argument.

Third, and I won't press this, the non-realist reading of the two triangles argument makes it out to be quite similar to arguments Leibniz uses elsewhere. For example, the two triangles argument, on the non-realist reading, looks similar to the argument that

made it into the final draft of Leibniz's 28 November/8 December 1686 letter to Arnauld (G II: 76/LA: 94). Also, the non-realist reading of the two triangles argument makes it out to be quite similar to an argument Leibniz makes in a short article he wrote between 1682-1683 (A VI, 4: 1464/Ar 257 f.). The realist reading of the two triangles argument, by contrast, doesn't look much like the 1682-83 argument or, I think, like what makes it into the final draft.

But my interpretation is open to a serious objection.¹⁰

5

At the end of his (2003), Levey writes,

One might be tempted to respond [to my construal of the two triangles argument] by taking Leibniz to be arguing against the Cartesian theory of corporeal substance on (at least some) Cartesian terms—borrowing a premise he himself rejects, but which the Cartesian theory affirms, in order to be able to argue from premises which a Cartesian must accept. Thus the claims that bodies are substances is supposed to be an expedient maintained for the sake of argument and not a commitment of Leibniz's own philosophy. (269-270)

I gave in to a different temptation. Rather than having Leibniz put forward a premise he does not accept, I have him putting that premise forward as the antecedent of a conditional he accepts—if bodies are substances, their essence is not merely extension. However, Levey's criticism of the temptation described above applies to my view too. It

¹⁰ Two other interpretations of the two triangles argument, consistent with Leibniz as a non-realist: (1) Levey got the interpretation of the argument right but Leibniz isn't endorsing the argument. Levey considers this and I discuss his response in the next section. (2) Levey got the interpretation of Leibniz right and Leibniz believes there are bodies and they are essentially merely extended, he just denies they are substances. This is an intriguing view—Garber attributes something like it to Fardella in Garber (2005)—and I think it makes good sense of the early parts of the Leibniz-Arnauld correspondence. For more discussion, see [deleted].

applies to *any* non-realist interpretation of Leibniz. The criticism is that no such view can explain why Leibniz thinks

DESCARTES WAS WRONG—If there are bodies, they are not essentially merely extended. If there are bodies, they have substantial forms

and

THE SCHOLASTICS WERE RIGHT—There are substantial forms

are closely connected.

On the realist reading, the connection is straightforward: DWW is a consequence of an argument that uses realism as a premise. DWW and that premise entail SWR. Those who think Leibniz is an idealist or otherwise not committed to realism, obviously, reject that realism is a premise in Leibniz's argument. So they can't give realism's straightforward account of the connection. Realists argue they can give no such account.

I think this is wrong. Leibniz connects DWW and SWR in two ways in the Arnauld correspondence, neither of which relies on realism, both of which are philosophically significant.

Way #1: Leibniz accepts that he is a substance. But there are only two live possibilities in the correspondence about what sort of substance he is: a soul or an embodied soul.¹¹ If he is an embodied soul, there are forms—that follows from DWW.¹² If he's a soul, there are forms—throughout the correspondence, Leibniz treats talk of

¹¹ I am not denying that Leibniz often *says* he is an organic body, an embodied soul. When I say one possibility is that Leibniz is a soul, I have in mind the position Adams ascribes to Leibniz in his (1994). Whether or not you are convinced by Adams's reading, it does seem a live possibility.

The project of explaining away *all* Leibniz's apparent assertions of realism is too much for one paper. I do think that the vast majority of those assertions in the correspondence can be explained away as I explained away the assertion Levey fastens on to. And don't think an anti-realist interpretation of Leibniz need explain all the assertions away. See section 8 for more on this.

¹² This premise is endorsed at G II: 58/LA: 66; G II: 72/LA: 88; G II: 77/LA: 95; G II: 97/LA: 122; G II: 118/LA: 151; G II: 120/LA: 154; G II: 124/LA: 158; G II: 135/LA: 170.

souls as tantamount to talk of forms.¹³ So there are forms. Way #1, like the realist connection, has DWW as a premise in the argument for SWR, but, unlike the realist connection, it does not have realism as a premise.

Though each of the premises and the conclusion of Way #1 show up in the correspondence, nowhere are they clearly seen together. The closest they come to being put together is at G II: 120-121/LA: 154-155 where Leibniz notes that our ideas of substances are ideas of bodies or souls, then notes that if there are bodies, there are souls, strongly suggests that some substances just are souls,¹⁴ and leaves open that we are bodies or just souls. Either way, there are forms.

Where the idea driving Way #1 is that whatever sort of substance Leibniz turns out to be, it is or has a form, the idea driving Way #2 is that *any* substance whatsoever is or has a form.¹⁵ If there are substances, they are or have forms. DWW follows. There is at least one substance—Leibniz himself. Hence, there are forms. So Way #2 connects DWW and SWR quite differently than the realist connection and Way #1. Way #2 has DWW and SWR as branches off the same trunk and not, as the realist connection and Way #1 have it, SWR being a branch off DWW.

¹³ That talk of one is tantamount to talk of the other is endorsed at G II: 58/LA: 65; G II: 58/LA: 66; G II 71/LA 87; G II: 72/LA: 88; G II: 72/LA: 89; G II: 73; LA: 89; G II: 75; LA: 93; G II: 76; LA: 94; G II: 92; LA: 115; G II: 100/LA: 125; G II: 116/LA: 149; G II 118/LA 151; G II: 120/LA: 154.

¹⁴ I am thinking of “To assert that every substance which is not divisible (that is to say...every substance...) is a mind and must think seems to me incomparably more audacious...than the preservation of forms” (G II 121/LA 154-155). To my ear, this strongly suggests that *some* substances are minds, that is, thinking souls (G II 120/LA 154). What is so audacious is thinking *only* minds could be substances.

¹⁵ Like Sleigh, I assume that Leibniz holds that at least some forms, souls, *are* substances. Sleigh defends this in Sleigh (1990): 116 and Mercer and Sleigh (1995): 111. See G II 68/LA 84; G II 74/LA 92; G II 75/LA 93; G II 83/LA 104; G II 99/LA 124; G II 113/LA 146; and, G II 117/LA 150-151. I think the textual evidence supporting that souls are substances is a bit more explicit than Sleigh does. Sleigh singles out the first passage as the only totally clear statement of the thesis that souls are substances but many of the others make no sense without it.

Way #2 is, I believe, how Sleigh would have Leibniz connect DWW to SWR. My views about what is going on with regard to forms in the Leibniz-Arnauld correspondence are quite close to his.

Support for the crucial premise in Way #2—if there are substances, they are or have forms—comes in three places: the unsent draft of the 28 November/8 December 1686 letter, the final draft of that letter, and the 9 October 1687 letter.

In the first, finished with the two triangles argument, Leibniz writes,

The substance of a body, if bodies have one, must be indivisible; whether it is called soul or form does not concern me...[T]he general concept of individual substance...proves the same thing. (G II: 72/LA: 88)

According to the last sentence, from the concept of a substance, we can figure out DWW. But “body” here is just a stand-in: the substance of anything, Leibniz thinks, must be indivisible. That thing is a soul, a form, etc (here is it important to keep in mind a premise of Way #1, that ‘form’ and ‘soul’ are close to equivalent in the correspondence). So if there are substances at all, there are these indivisible things—souls, forms. So if there are substances, there are forms.

In the 28 November/8 December 1686 letter, Leibniz writes,

Substantial unity requires a complete, indivisible and naturally indestructible entity...which cannot be found in [extension] but in a soul or substantial form after the example of what one calls *self*...The above-mentioned self, or *its counterpart in each individual substance*, cannot [come from extension alone]. (G II: 76/LA: 94-95; the second emphasis is mine)

The idea is that if there are substances, they are unities. If there are unities, there are souls, forms, selves, etc. So if there are substances, there are forms. The italicized bit of the quotation above seems to me to very clearly commit to this.

Still later, Leibniz writes, summarizing his side of the whole Leibniz-Arnauld correspondence,

If you could find time to look again...at what we had finally decided about the concept of an individual substance, you would perhaps find that in

conceding me these beginnings one is subsequently obliged to grant me all the rest. (G II: 127/LA: 162)

This is an amazing claim. From Leibniz's theses about what substances are like, he thinks *all* the rest follows: DWW, SWR, pre-established harmony, an infinity of creatures, and so on. So if there are substances, there are forms.

Because of these three texts, there is good reason to believe *that* Leibniz holds the crucial premise of Way #2: if there are substances, there are forms. Way #2, of course, raises the question of *why* a form would be needed. Good question, a long answer to which requires a long paper of its own. The short answer is that many of the reasons supporting that if there are bodies, they have forms also support that if there are any substances at all, they are or have forms. Three stand out.

6

In the two triangles passage, one question is: if triangles made a substance, what would be responsible for that? Not touching, not being fastened or moving together. Something is needed to unify the substance the triangles would make. Leibniz concludes that if these things make a substance, the thing that does the unifying would be a form.

Take a different substance, a mind. There is no question here about how the parts of a mind make it up—we can assume minds are partless. An analogous question does come up. My mind is in a variety of *states* right now: wondering about Leibniz, wanting to write, remembering a passage. What makes it the case that these states are states of a single substance? Each mind, like each animate substance, is “a world of diversities

within a genuine unity” (G II: 99/LA: 124). Something is needed to unify the world of diversities—a form, a soul, does the trick. At least, Leibniz considers no other options.¹⁶

Besides unifying at a time, a form unifies over time in bodies. That rabbit, if there is such a substance, is the same one I saw yesterday, maybe a bit fatter, but the same rabbit. What makes this the case? Again, extension cannot explain this. As Leibniz notes, the parts of the rabbit are not the same as the parts yesterday. If parts moving together or being organized a certain way sufficed to unify, then the Dutch East India Co. or frozen batches of fish would be substances—they aren’t. Seeing no other candidate, Leibniz concludes that merely extended things wouldn’t be unified over time. A form can do the unifying. This is clear from G II 43/LA 46, G II 53/LA 60, G 99/LA 124, G II: 120/LA: 153, and G II 125/LA 160. Minds, too, need to be unified over time. Why is the thing that was thinking about Leibniz the same as the thing that is now thinking of unity? A unifier is needed and a soul can do it via, say, recollection (G II 125/LA: 160; cf. G II 57/LA 64).¹⁷

Leibniz offers another explanation of why substances require forms. If there are substances, he thinks, they express the entire universe.¹⁸ A merely extended thing would not be so expressive. For a body to express the universe, it needs a form, a soul, etc. Leibniz writes, “all the forms of substances express the whole universe,” specifying not

¹⁶ Jolley suggests consciousness itself is what unifies these states: all are part of a single, unified consciousness (cf. Wilson (1974): 397). See Jolley (2005). I fear I misunderstand Jolley’s idea since, by stipulation, some of the states that need unifying aren’t conscious.

¹⁷ Note, too, that Leibniz believes unity is provided at and over time via causation. See Sleigh (1990). There is no need for a thing to have parts to see how it could be unified in this way. If causation provides unity, it could do so for simple things as well as complex ones. For more on this, see [deleted].

¹⁸ See G II 47/LA 52; G II 51/LA 57; G II 57-58/LA 64-66; G II 69/LA 84; G II 70/LA 86; G II 71/LA 92; G II 78/LA 96; G II 113/LA 146; G II 124/LA 159.

What expression comes to is an important, difficult question. The answer to it is, I think, unimportant for my purposes. What is important is Leibniz’s idea that a form is needed to do the expression, whatever, exactly, expressing comes to.

just that substances express the universe but that it is the form which is responsible for the expression (G II: 124/LA: 159). Earlier, he writes, “the soul...is...the form of its body *because* it is an expression of the phenomena of all other bodies” (G II: 58/LA: 65-66; my emphasis). Similar ideas are expressed, less explicitly, at G II: 78/LA: 96. These passages might just give a sufficient condition for expression: if something is a form, it expresses the whole universe, leaving open that perhaps things other than forms can do so. But, since Leibniz offers no other candidate—I offer him one in the next section—it is hard to see what this other thing could be. So substances need forms because substance need to express the universe and forms alone do so.

Leibniz also argues that if there are substances, they “embrace” or “express” or “contain traces of” their past, present, and future states.¹⁹ It is somehow written into me that various things will happen to me in the next few minutes, written into me that various things did happen to me a few years ago. Were I merely extended, this wouldn’t be so.²⁰ A form, a soul, etc. is needed for a body to do that embracing, expressing, containing. The idea is most clear at G II: 76/LA: 94 where Leibniz writes,

Substantial unity requires a complete, indivisible, and naturally indestructible entity, since its concept embraces everything that is to happen to it, which cannot be found in shape or motion...but in a soul or substantial form after the example of what one calls *self*.

Two small things about this passage: other, similar passage makes clear that the substance itself, as well as its concept, embraces everything that is to happen to it (G II: 78/LA: 96; G II: 136/LA: 170). And other, similar passage make clear that the substance embraces everything that has and is happening to it as well as that will happen (G II:

¹⁹ See G II 47/LA 51; G II 57/LA 64; G II 70/LA 86; G II 72/LA 88; G II 76/LA 94; G II 78/LA 96; G II 136/LA 170.

²⁰ A compressed argument for this is in Adams (1994): 317. For a more extended one, see Sleigh (1990): 128-132.

72/LA: 88; G II: 78/LA: 96; G II: 136/LA: 170). Note that the passage is general: any unity, bodily or otherwise, would be like this. So if there are substances, there are forms because if there are substances, they embrace the past, present, and future, and if something does that embracing, it is a form or a counterpart thereof.

So there are at least three reasons Leibniz offers for why bodies require forms that generalize to explain why any substance requires a form: the need for unity (at a time and over time), the need to embrace the universe, and the need to express past, present, and future states. Whatever the reason, Leibniz holds that if there are substances, there are forms. This is the crucial claim in Way #2's linkage of DWW and SWR.

According to both Way #1 and Way #2, Leibniz's discussion of bodies establishes that there are forms. However, neither way commits to there being bodies. On Way #1, discussion of bodies serves the conditional claim that if there are bodies, there are forms. On Way #2, the discussion of bodies illustrates the need for forms but that discussion is just an illustration. Many of the reasons Leibniz adduces in support of the claim that bodies require forms show that *any substance* requires a form. So the realist challenge can be met. Those who think Leibniz is an idealist, like those who think he is a realist, can explain why Leibniz thinks there is a tight connection between DWW and SWR.

7

If Leibniz connects

DESCARTES WAS WRONG—If there are bodies, they are not essentially merely extended. If there are bodies, they have substantial forms

and

THE SCHOLASTICS WERE RIGHT—There are substantial forms

in Way #2, via the premise that if there are substances, there are forms, then if minds are substances, then they are or have forms. Supporting that conditional is the idea that if minds are substances, they have the features of all substances outlined in the previous two sections: unity, expression, traces.²¹ If there are things with those features, there are forms. So if minds are substances, they have or are substantial forms.

An objection to this line of argument is that, when it comes to minds, there is no need for a form: a simple, thinking thing with the relevant features would be enough to be a substance without needing, in addition, a form. I think the objection is partly correct but entirely misleading. A simple, thinking thing with all features necessary to be a substance—unity, expression, etc—would be a substance. Would it need “in addition” a form? No, but I think it would *be* a form.²² When Arnauld complains that he doesn’t know what forms are, Leibniz just has him consider his soul. It’s a thing like that, Leibniz says. Now, Leibniz isn’t saying that any form would be just like our soul (some forms wouldn’t be conscious, for example), but Leibniz’s idea is that a form is a thing, like our soul, that unites, expresses, contains traces, etc. If something does that, it’s a form. But if something does that, it isn’t *merely* a thinking thing.

The problem for the Cartesian conception of mind is that being a merely thinking thing is not enough to be a substance. Take a simple, thinking thing. Now, it is thinking

²¹ Leibniz thinks substances need have many more features than this: they have to have a complete concept, be discernible from other substances, be incorruptible, indivisible, ingenerable, and “a world apart.” Something that is unclear to me is why Leibniz hammers at Descartes mainly on the issue of unity. For example, while he hammers on the Cartesian view because if bodies were essentially merely extended, there would be no substances because no unities, he doesn’t, in the correspondence, at least, hammer away at the idea that if there is body-body interaction, there are no bodily substances. But he does seem committed to the idea that if there are substances, they don’t interact. (This last point assumes Descartes thinks there is body-body interaction but can be made without that assumption.)

²² To clear up something that seems odd about my view: earlier, I wrote that a mind needs a unifier. This suggests that minds have forms without being forms. I leave that possibility open here—and develop it some in [deleted]—but a more natural idea is that a mind with unity would be a form.

Obviously, there is a good question about *how* forms unify minds or bodies. Mercer (2005) is a recent discussion of Leibniz’s views and Sleight’s view of Leibniz.

about Leibniz. A minute ago, something was wanting a drink. In a minute, something will be hoping for rain. As it happens, this is a single thing. But what unifies it? Its *thinking* doesn't seem to be enough. These thoughts are disconnected from each other. The last, we can stipulate, is unconscious. And while I have stipulated this simple, thinking thing is a thing, it is still worth wondering *why* it's a unity. Why are all of its states the states of a substance? I have stipulated they are, but Descartes's theory does nothing to explain this. He might add that it's because they are all states of a single, unified consciousness, but this requires thought to be conscious, something Leibniz would reject.

Most importantly, a simple, thinking thing, even one that is a unity over time, needn't express the universe or contain traces of the future. Say its unity comes from memory and consider such a simple, thinking thing that *only* had the power of memory. This thing would be just like one of Cordemoy's atoms: unified, indestructible, indivisible, ingenerable, etc. What Leibniz says about Cordemoy's atoms is instructive: "if man contains only a figured mass of infinite hardness...he cannot in himself embrace all past and future states, and still less those of the whole universe" (G II: 78/LA: 96). But a Cartesian mind of the sort just mentioned would be just like an atom except its unity comes from memory not from its extended, infinite hardness. And memory alone doesn't seem to suffice to express the whole universe. Same goes for embracing all *future* states (though memory could account for traces of the past.) But if so, something could meet Descartes's conditions for being a mind without being a substance.

Once you add traces, expression, etc. to this simple, remembering thing, you'll, in fact, have a substance. But it would be a mistake to describe this thing as essentially

merely thinking. So Descartes was wrong about what minds are like as well as what bodies are like. He was less badly wrong. Leibniz stresses in the correspondence that our minds are thinking things. So Descartes was on the right track. But their essence can't be merely thinking, on pains of their not being substances.

This is an important consequence of Way #2's linkage of DWW and SWR. By insisting that if there are substances at all, there are forms, Leibniz commits to the essence of minds not being thought.

8

I have considered two arguments for Leibniz being a realist in the Arnauld correspondence, both forcefully defended in Levey (2003). First, Leibniz endorses the two triangles argument and it commits to realism. Second, Leibniz believes there are substantial forms and the only route to them is through a premise that commits to realism. I am not convinced by either of these arguments.

Levey also has a challenge for those who think that Leibniz is an idealist during the Leibniz-Arnauld correspondence. If you look at the whole correspondence, and in particular the texts I have focused on, "how could Leibniz *possibly* be talking about *monads* in that exchange?" (268).²³ More pressingly, how could he *just* be talking about monads? I am sympathetic to this challenge, but I don't think it need lead to realism.

When Leibniz first tells Arnauld that if there are bodies, they are not essentially merely extended (in the 4/14 July 1686 letter), whether or not bodies are hunks of extension is not a question that needs answering. What generates Leibniz's worry about

²³ Cf. Garber (1992) where the realist challenge to Sleight (1990) is bipartite: first, the evidence for idealism Sleight presents isn't *that* strong and, second, the idealist needs to explain away all Leibniz's talk of bodies. The realist, by contrast, takes it at face value.

extension is a worry about bodies having parts (though Leibniz wouldn't have put it like this; see footnote 23): whether these parts are hunks of extension, infinitely divisible mind-like substances, or something else is unimportant. This shows that strong realism, at least, might not have been on Leibniz's mind. What I think was on Leibniz's mind is what it would take for some things to compose a substance.²⁴ Learning the nature of these things need not be crucial for answering this question. Further, whether or not things *ever* compose a substance needn't have been on Leibniz's mind. Even if Leibniz were an idealist, he might well be interested in the questions he wrestles with in the Arnauld correspondence. Part of a good case against strong and weak realism would involve trying to answer the question "What does it take for some things to compose a substance?" and seeing how awful the answers look.

Relatedly, part of the case *for* any of idealism, weak realism, or Leibnizian strong realism would be an argument that there are forms or souls or their "counterpart in each individual substance" (G II: 76/LA: 95). So the argument for forms is important but neutral between idealism, weak realism, and strong realism. There is no need to attribute one to Leibniz from the texts we have been considering.

So I feel the force of Levey's question: how could Leibniz be talking about monads and just monads in some of those passages? But it can be met with another question: why think he was *asserting* there are bodies? It is a strength of the two non-

²⁴ The interest persists. In his 9 October 1687 letter, Leibniz is still hammering away at questions of substantial forms and bodies and writes, "The problems that are raised on these topics originate *inter alia* from the absence usually of a distinct enough concept of the whole and part..." (G II: 120; LA: 153) I don't want to rest too much on this passage since it is a bit unclear what "these topics" refers to. Still, I read Leibniz as saying that all these issues about substantial forms and bodies that he and Arnauld have been discussing are only of instrumental interest to him: they are tools to help him get clear on the relation between whole and part. (Note that Leibniz might not have put things this way in light of his claim that "no entity that is really one is composed of a plurality of parts...and those things that have parts are not entities, but merely phenomena" (A. VI, 4: 627/Ar. 271). I think he would have accepted the idea conveyed by the suspect terminology.)

realist, idealist-friendly ways of connecting DWW and SWR that they can explain why Leibniz talked so much about the nature of bodies in the Arnauld correspondence. But neither has Leibniz asserting there are bodies. Further, that is *exactly* what you would predict from the text on which Levey bases his first argument for Leibniz's realism. The realist interpretation of that text includes that Leibniz asserts there are bodies. I argued there is no such assertion. However, there is no denial that there are bodies either. There are just many assertions of DWW and other conditionals where the antecedent is *if there are bodies*. Leibniz gave himself, in these texts, plenty of chances to endorse or deny the antecedent. He kept declining them. The texts, then, don't support that Leibniz is a realist, but neither do they support that he is an idealist. That is what my two ways of connecting DWW and SWR would predict: Leibniz's interest is in showing that any substance he could be (Way #1) or any substance at all (Way #2) would be or have a form. Whether it would or could, to boot, be extended needn't have been on his mind. The passages I have been interested in don't force bodies on us. The connection between DWW and SWR can be built without them. And Leibniz's main interest—the existence of forms—is independent of them.

Two upshots: I say that the passages Levey and I are interested in don't force bodies on us because, though Leibniz frequently asserts DWW, he goes out of his way *not* to assert that its antecedent is true or false. This is some support for the view that Leibniz neither believed realism nor believed idealism during the Leibniz-Arnauld correspondence.²⁵

²⁵ See Garber (2004), Garber (2005), Jolley (2005), and Lodge (2005a) for other, recent discussions of this view.

As I see it, Leibniz repeatedly talked about bodies just to illustrate theses he had about substances. Whether or not there are bodies isn't a question that needs answering before the illustration can be drawn. My response to the second realist argument is supportive of my first here: if what really moves Leibniz are questions—what makes a substance? Why forms?—that idealists and realists need answer, there is no need to commit to *which* things are substances.

There is another significant upshot of my arguments. Just focus on Way #2 of connecting DWW to SWR (something similar holds of Way #1, I believe). If this is a sound route from DWW to SWR, then any substance has certain features and these features are provided only by forms, so even minds, if they are substances, are or have forms. Merely thinking is not enough to provide these features. So either Descartes is wrong about the essence of minds as well as bodies or no mind is a substance. My point isn't just that Descartes was wrong about what minds are like, according to Leibniz. My point is not, for example, that Descartes was wrong about the importance of consciousness (Simmons (2001)) or innate ideas (Jolley (1990)). That would be consistent with Descartes being right that the essence of minds is thought, though wrong about what thought was. If minds are substances and substances are or need forms, then thought can't be the whole story about what minds are. Leibniz believes Descartes was quite a bit more wrong than he lets on.

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