

Midwest Seminar Abstracts

“Nearer to God than All Other Things”: Leibniz’s Account of Human Uniqueness

Lea F. Schweitz
(Chicago)

In a letter to Antoine Arnauld from 1686, Leibniz seems to make a claim about the uniqueness of rational souls: “The rational soul is created only at the time of the formation of its body, *being entirely different from the other souls we know*, because it is capable of reflection and it imitates the divine nature on a small scale” (AG 78).^[1] It is a claim that is repeated in several formulations throughout Leibniz’s writings. Focusing on texts from around the period of the correspondence with Arnauld and the *Discourse on metaphysics*, this paper asks, for Leibniz, what makes rational souls “entirely different from the other souls we know”? And, insofar as some rational souls are human, in what (if any) sense are human souls unique for Leibniz? Taking a cue from passages like the one above, some commentators have argued that Leibniz solves the problem of human uniqueness by identifying some feature of the rational soul, such as reflection, as the relevant difference.^[2] However, this is to ignore or reduce Leibniz’s accompanying claim that rational souls are different because they “imitate the divine nature on a small scale.”

I begin by considering Leibniz’s account of the difference between humans and animals. Taking into account Kulstad’s careful treatment of this difference, I argue that the relevant difference for distinguishing humans from the rest of the created order cannot come from within the Kingdom of Nature. To do so would be to introduce an ontological gap into the order of nature, and Leibniz maintains that there are no such gaps.^[3] Unlike the (infamous) Cartesian position that marks out humanity with a strict ontological exclusion of animal minds, Leibniz’s anthropology leaves humanity embedded within the natural order. Any attempt to find a difference between humans and animals that relies on natural features, such as bodies or souls, threatens to undermine humanity’s residency in the Kingdom of Nature.

In light of this, I argue that Leibniz's account of human uniqueness requires, as he writes in the *Discourse*, “joining morals to metaphysics” (AG 66). For Leibniz, human uniqueness is not to be found in the Kingdom of Nature but in the Kingdom of Grace. I develop this proposal by considering Leibniz’s texts on human citizenship in the City of God and his texts on the *persons* of the trinity. In the end, though Leibniz is committed to the rationality of the human soul, it is human citizenship in the City of God that grounds his claims to human uniqueness and makes us “nearer to God than all other things” (AG 66). By distinguishing humans from the rest of the created order in terms of human relationship to God, Leibniz preserves a view of human dignity that explains his commitment to human uniqueness, justifies anthropomorphisms of God, and maintains the continuity, comprehensiveness, and consistency of his vision of nature.

[1] AG = Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz, *Philosophical Essays*, ed. Roger Ariew and Daniel Garber, trans. Roger Ariew and Daniel Garber (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1989). (emphasis added)

[2] See Mark Kulstad, *Leibniz on Apperception, Consciousness and Reflection* (München: Philosophia, 1991).

[3] There are other related passages in earlier texts, but here is one clear instance from the *New Essays*: “Birds, which are otherwise so different from man, approach him by virtue of their speech, but if monkeys could speak as parrots can they would approach him even more closely. The *Law of Continuity* states that nature leaves no gaps in the orderings which she follows.” (NE 307)

The Modal Strength of Leibniz's Principle of the Identity of Indiscernibles

Anja Jauernig
[Notre Dame]

One of the most notorious principles in the Leibnizian corpus is the principle of the identity of indiscernibles (PII). In its most general formulation it states that indiscernibles are identical, or, in other words, that there can't be things that differ only numerically. The significance of the PII depends on how indiscernibility is understood, and what kind of entities are allowed as 'things'. In this paper, the focus will be on the version of the PII that says that individuals are identical if, and only if, they have the same qualitative properties, which I take to be Leibniz's preferred version of the PII. The project of this paper is to clarify what modal strength Leibniz wants to ascribe to this version of the PII by analyzing and evaluating some of Leibniz's central arguments in support of this principle as well as some prominent objections that have been brought forward against the PII, and to spell out the wider implications for Leibniz's views on individuation that can be inferred from these arguments and Leibniz's (presumed) responses to these objections. The arguments in question include Leibniz's (seeming) derivation of the PII from his doctrine of complete concepts, or, more generally, from his conception of truth, and his proof of the PII based on the principle of sufficient reason, or, more precisely, the principle of perfection.

The cumulative result of this investigation is that the situation is much more messy than is commonly recognized. To my mind, there is no fully satisfactory answer to the question of what modal strength Leibniz wants to ascribe to the PII, but from among the various possible readings the following three stand out as overall most promising and potentially defense-worthy: Reading 1): For Leibniz the PII is a contingent principle, but one that is true not only in the actual world but in all genuinely possible worlds, i.e., in all worlds that are genuine candidates for God's choice of which world to create. Distinct indiscernible individuals are possible, but not actual since their creation would violate the principle of perfection. Assuming that individuality requires that there be something that distinguishes each individual from every other one in a which-is-which sense, it follows that distinct indiscernible individuals are

possible only if primitive non-qualitative haecceities are possible. In order to (completely) describe possible worlds in which distinct indiscernible individuals exist God must, thus, add indices to the complete concepts of the indiscernible individuals, by means of which He can tell them apart. Reading 2): Leibniz is committed to the claim that God's purely qualitative privileged descriptions of possible worlds in terms of the complete concepts of individuals are complete, which implies that primitive non-qualitative haecceities are impossible. Since distinct indiscernible individuals are possible only if primitive non-qualitative haecceities are possible, the PII is a necessary principle. Leibniz admits, though, that there are possible worlds in which distinct indiscernible objects exist, which objects, however, don't possess any thisness or haecceity at all, neither qualitative nor primitive, and can, accordingly, not be counted as individuals. In this way, Leibniz can accept differences in the number of existent objects as a difference between possible realities in its own right without assuming primitive haecceities. The principle that there are no distinct indiscernible objects is contingently true of the actual world. Reading 3): This reading agrees with reading 2, except that instead of allowing non-individuated (or non-individual) objects to be possible, it allows multiple 'copies' of the same individual to be possible.

This is another way in which Leibniz could accept differences in the number of existent objects as a difference between possible realities in its own right without assuming primitive haecceities.

Spinoza's Virtuous Passions

Matt Kisner
[South Carolina]

It is often assumed that Spinoza's moral philosophy aims to eliminate passivity and thus passive affects or passions as much as possible. [\[i\]](#) However, since Spinoza allows for the possibility of passive pleasure (3p11sch) and pleasure represents an increase in one's power (E3doe2), it follows that we can increase our power through passivity. Consequently, following Spinoza's prescription to increase our power may sometimes require us to be passive and thus, have passive affects. Little attention has been paid to the ways in which passivity and the passions may increase our power. Part of the reason for this neglect is that commentators have had difficulty explaining how a passion can increase one's power consistently with Spinoza's philosophy: when we are passive, we are directed by external forces, which would seem to be inconsistent with acting from our own power. The problem has led some commentators to conclude that Spinoza was mistaken to recognize passive pleasure and that perhaps he didn't really think such a thing was even possible. [\[ii\]](#)

This paper aims to make explicit how the passions contribute positively to a virtuous life. This requires, first, responding to the problem above by explaining how it is possible in Spinoza's philosophy for a passion to increase one's power. In brief, this paper will argue that, for Spinoza, even when we are passively affected, we are somewhat active to varying degrees. More specifically, the passions represent our activity because they exercise our understanding by providing us with intelligence about external bodies and our own bodies, in particular, the degree of our bodies' perfection. It follows that a passion can be sufficiently adequate to bring about an increase in one's power.

Having explained how Spinoza can allow for passive pleasures, this paper turns to a largely unexamined consequence of this claim: since Spinoza equates our power with our virtue (4def8), it follows that passive pleasure—in other words, a passion—can be virtuous. This paper will argue that passions for Spinoza can be virtuous both in the sense of increasing our power and in a more squarely moral sense of

‘virtue.’ The latter claim goes roughly as follows: according to Spinoza, the passions serve as a measure of our perfection. Consequently, they play a necessary role in moral reasoning, by indicating which activities increase or hinder our virtue. On this view, a truly virtuous person would require the passions in order to engage consistently in the sort of activities which increase her power, namely rational behaviors. Since this sort of consistency in behavior is necessary for what we usually regard as a virtuous character, the passions can be virtuous in the sense that they are necessary aspects of the sort of character which disposes one to act according to reason. By allowing a positive role for the passions in a life of virtue, Spinoza departs from much of ancient ethics and, in particular, from the stoics, to whom he is frequently compared.

[i] It is very common to draw this conclusion in passing, for instance, see Ronald Sandler, “*Intuitus* and *Ratio* in Spinoza’s Ethical Thought”, *British Journal for the History of Philosophy* 13 (2005): 73. The position is more forcefully defended by those who read Spinoza as a Stoic, such as Susan James, “Spinoza the Stoic” [“Stoic”], in *The Rise of Modern Philosophy*, ed. Tom Sorell (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993), 289-316. In particular, Nussbaum criticizes Spinoza for an intolerance of passivity and weakness, which she attributes to stoic influence. See Martha Nussbaum, *Upheavals of Thought: The Intelligence of Emotions* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 502. Another group of scholars recognize that Spinoza accepts the value of passivity, but argue that he cannot do so consistently: Paul Hoffman, “Three Dualist Theories of the Passions,” *Philosophical Topics* 19 (1991): 153-200 and Michael LeBuffe, “The Anatomy of the Passions,” manuscript (forthcoming in the *Cambridge Companion to Spinoza’s Ethics*). A final group argue that Spinoza does not see the free man as a model to which we should hold ourselves. Since the free man is completely active, these scholars uphold the line I am pushing in a very roundabout way.

See Don Garrett, “A Free Man Always Acts Honestly, Not Deceptively: Freedom and the Good in Spinoza’s Ethics,” in *Spinoza: Issues and Directions*, ed. Edwin Curley and Pierre-Francois Moreau (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1990), 221-38 and Daniel Garber, “Dr. Fischelson’s Dilemma: Spinoza on Freedom and Sociability” [“Dr. Fichelson”], in *Spinoza on Reason and the Free Man*, ed. Yirmiyahu Yovel and Gideon Segal (New York: Little Room Press, 2004), 183-207. For another position similar to mine see Ursula Goldenbaum, “The Affects as a Condition of Human Freedom in Spinoza’s Ethics,” from the same volume, 149-166.

[ii](#) Hoffman and LeBuffe.

Hume on the Epistemic Superiority of Polytheism to Monotheism

Liz Goodnick
University of Michigan

In Sections 9 and following of *The Natural History of Religion*, Hume presents a moral critique of both polytheism and traditional, or popular, monotheism. While he claims that polytheism encourages “activity, spirit, courage, magnanimity, love of liberty, and all the virtues which aggrandize a people” (NHR §10), he argues that traditional monotheism leads people astray from leading a virtuous life. Thus, he concludes that polytheism is morally superior to monotheism.

In this paper, I argue that Hume also believes that polytheism is *epistemically* superior to monotheism. Given that Hume thinks that neither polytheistic nor monotheistic beliefs are supported by evidence or rational argument, in order to judge their epistemic virtue, we must look to Hume’s discussion of the causes of the beliefs. Following the naturalistic trend in the secondary literature, I argue that, according to Hume, some beliefs (such as beliefs generated on the basis of inductive inference) are warranted even though they are not rationally justified. For each of these beliefs, Hume offers a causal history which explains both the belief’s origin and its inability to be rejected even in spite of (sometimes numerous) skeptical arguments against it.

However, Hume provides naturalistic explanations for several beliefs, not all of which he deems warranted. To distinguish between warranted beliefs and unwarranted beliefs, I simply look at the language that Hume uses when discussing them: e.g., does he call them superstitious, or does he use language that would indicate epistemic virtue? I argue that Hume thinks that neither polytheism nor monotheism is warranted. One upshot of my discussion is that, contrary to interpreters such as Butler, Hume does not regard monotheism as a “natural belief.”

But, in order to determine if monotheism is epistemically superior or inferior to polytheism, I must determine the degree of epistemic virtue possessed by each belief. I look first at the various psychological

propensities which cause the beliefs and second at the conditions under which those mechanisms are operating. On the one hand, there are some psychological propensities which typically cause beliefs of which Hume approves; while on the other hand, there are some propensities which typically cause beliefs of which Hume does not approve. Further, there are some beliefs which, despite the fact that they are psychologically determined, can (and ought to be) be resisted. Finally, there are some beliefs which may be caused (at least in part) by mechanisms that typically cause warranted beliefs; but, due to the conditions under which those mechanisms are operating, are not warranted.

In Sections 1-7 of the *Natural History*, Hume provides a naturalistic explanation of religious belief. He claims first that polytheism was the primary religion of man, and second that monotheism has come about through natural processes which have slowly transformed polytheistic beliefs into monotheistic ones. Thus, monotheism originated with polytheism, and is dependent on the same belief-forming mechanisms. Further, the additional mechanisms that lead from polytheism to monotheism are not of a sort that would improve its epistemic status.

In the first place, monotheism is primarily caused by exalting one god above the others. This mechanism Hume calls a “propensity to adulation,” and he says that it often leads to contradictions. Hence, it is not the kind of psychological mechanism which typically produces warranted beliefs. In the second place, Hume claims that monotheism has a tendency to revert to polytheism, suggesting that it is caused by psychological principles which, though strong, can be (and sometimes are) resisted. Finally, Hume claims that this mechanism is operating under conditions of fear; and I argue that beliefs produced under conditions of fear are often problematic. So, monotheism is built upon polytheism using a psychological principle that does not typically produce warranted beliefs, is resistible, and is operating under poor conditions. Thus I conclude, on Hume’s view, polytheism is epistemically superior to monotheism.

Descartes on God's Relation to Time

Geoffrey Gorham
[Wisconsin, Eau Claire]

God and time play important, intricately related, roles in grounding Cartesian physics. The three laws of motion and the principle of conservation of total quantity of motion all turn on the need for God's continuous creation of the world, which is in turn derived from a certain fact about '*temporis naturam*', namely that it is divisible into countless independent parts (AT 7: 49, CSM 2: 33). It is also crucial to Descartes' system that God operates in a temporally invariant (immutable) fashion: "he conserves the same amount of motion and rest in the material universe as he put there in the beginning". (AT 8A 61; CSM 1 240) But what exactly is God's relation to time?

Seventeenth century discussions of this question rely on the standard scholastic distinction two species of duration: *time* and *eternity*. The duration of a thing is simply its persistence in being. As Suarez puts it, there is "merely a conceptual distinction between duration and existence". (DM 50, 1, 5) But different things endure in different ways. Time is the duration of things which exist successively, i.e. with parts arranged 'before and after'. For example, a human life is temporal because infancy is before childhood, adolescence after childhood, and so on. By contrast, eternity is the duration of things which exist permanently or 'all at once' (*tota simul*). For eternal things there is no past or future, only a 'standing now' (*nunc stans*). Although the unanimous opinion of the scholastics was that God is eternal rather than temporal, seventeenth-century philosophers outside the schools were divided. Thus, while Spinoza maintained that God's existence is eternal in a sense that "cannot be explained by duration or time, even if this duration is conceived to be without beginning or end" (*Ethics* I, Def.. 8; Cf. V p23s), Newton found no difficulty in saying of God simply that "He was, and is, and is to come" (*Locus et Tempus*, 121).

In this paper I argue – against the strong current of recent commentary (Schmaltz, Garber, Cottingham, Chappell, Marion, etc.) – that Descartes' God is squarely in time. In support of this interpretation, I first attempt to accommodate the scant, and seemingly inconsistent, direct textual

evidence. Next, I present the main argument for my interpretation, which is that the most important function of God in Cartesian physics – grounding the laws of nature – requires that his operation is successive. For example, the law of rectilinear motion follows from the fact that God “always conserves the motion in the precise form in which it is occurring at the very moment when he preserves it, without taking account of the motion which was occurring a little while earlier” (AT 8A 63-4; CSM I 242). This argument strongly suggests that God’s actions are temporally successive. Similar considerations apply to the other laws and to the conservation principle. And although there are models of divine operation available to Descartes which allow God to subsist eternally even though the effects of his operation are successive, I argue that none of these models are adequate to the proofs given in the second part of the *Principles*. Descartes’ God is inextricably involved in successive processes. Granted Descartes declares in the first part of the *Principles* that “there is always a single identical and perfectly simple act by means of which he simultaneously understands, wills and accomplishes everything” (AT 8A 14; CSM I 201). But on a very natural reading of this passage, Descartes means only that God’s action is unique and simple *at any time* rather than absolutely timeless.

Finally, I reply to three potential objections. First, since God creates the eternal truths he is presumably as timeless as they are. I answer that the sense in which these truths are eternal is *sameness at all times*. This is something Descartes makes explicit on at least one occasion: “since they are always the same (*eadem semper*), it is right to call them immutable and eternal” (AT 7 261; CSM 2 261). Second, it might seem that if we make God temporal then we divide him into really distinct (temporal) parts. After all, Descartes says my own lifespan “can be divided into countless parts each completely independent of the others” (AT 7 49; CSM 2 33). But surely Descartes’ God cannot have parts since “being divisible is an imperfection” (AT 8A 14; CSM I 201). I answer that temporal divisibility does not threaten the sort of divine simplicity important to Descartes, namely simplicity *in nature*. Third, I attempt to show that God’s temporality is consistent with his necessary existence, i.e. with the real identity between his existence and his essence.

Leibniz: Creation and Conservation and Concurrence

Jeffrey K. McDonough
Harvard University

Most theistically minded philosophers in the later medieval and early modern periods insisted that the ordinary causal unfolding of the world depends on God's efficient causal influence in at least three distinguishable ways. First, the world depends on God for creation itself, for its coming into being as it were. Second, the world depends on God for its continued existence, for, we as we might put it, its staying in being. Third, the production of effects by creatures within the order of nature requires an additional act of assistance on God's part known as "divine concurrence." Any non-miraculous change within nature – from the growth of an acorn, to the fall of a leaf – was thus thought to ultimately rest atop at least three conceptually distinct levels of dependence: divine creation, divine conservation, and divine concurrence.

There is no dispute that Leibniz explicitly commits himself to the traditional theological doctrines of creation, conservation, and concurrence. What is more controversial is how those doctrines are to be understood in connection with his views on theodicy and the metaphysics of created substances. The dependencies emphasized by traditional theological doctrines, as well as by Leibniz's Augustinian view that God alone is the immediate source of all that is truly *real* in the world, seem to push him towards an occasionalist position with respect to secondary agents. Leibniz's insistence that created substances are genuine active sources of change and development, as well as his suggestion that sin arises from the free choices of creatures, however, seem to push him towards a mere conservationist, or even a deist view of creaturely activity. Although there has been no shortage of ingenuity in previous attempts to reconcile Leibniz's views on theological doctrine, theodicy and the metaphysics of created substance, none has, I think proven really satisfying. On the one hand, readings that would attribute only negative, formal, or final causality to creatures have failed to do justice to Leibniz's commitment to the activity of created substances and their positive causal role in sinful actions.^[1] On the other hand, readings that have been

more attentive to Leibniz's views on creaturely activity haven't made it sufficiently clear how that activity is to be reconciled with creaturely dependence and a privation account of sinful actions. [2]

In this essay, I argue – contrary to current consensus – that the traditional theological doctrines concerning creaturely dependence which Leibniz embraces pose no deep threat to his views on theodicy and creaturely activity even as they are commonly understood. The paper itself falls into four main sections. The first takes up Leibniz's views on creation, paying special attention to his twin aims of showing that God is neither morally nor physically responsible for the initial imperfections of the world, as well as to the thesis that through creation God brings into existence genuine secondary causal agents. The second section turns to Leibniz's understanding of the doctrine of divine conservation, focusing on the compatibility between God's immediate *per se* conservation of creation and the possibility of change within the order of nature. The third section considers Leibniz's views on concurrentism, with special care being given to the question of how God and creatures might be thought to act together in bringing about creaturely effects, and how God's role in bringing about those effects within the order of nature is to be reconciled with the demands of Leibnizian theodicy. Finally, the fourth section takes up worries arising from the bridging principle that conservation is a continued, or continuous, creation, and argues that they dissolve if we resist the temptation to confuse the different layers of creaturely dependence distinguished by Leibniz. What emerges from the discussion is, I hope, a clearer picture of Leibniz's position on the nature of monadic causation, his understanding of the relationship between divine and creaturely activity, and how his views fit into the context of later medieval and early modern debates over concurrentism, mere conservationism, and occasionalism.

[1] See, for example, Robert Sleight, "Leibniz on Malebranche on Causality," in J. A. Cover and Mark Kulstad, eds., *Central Themes in Early Modern Philosophy* (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1990) 161-194; Robert Sleight, *Leibniz and Arnauld* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1990) 183-185; Sukjae Lee, "Leibniz on Divine Concurrence," *The Philosophical Review* (113:2) 2004: 203 – 248.

[2] See, for example, Robert Merrihew Adams, *Leibniz: Determinist, Theist, Idealist* (Oxford: Oxford University Press) 94-99, Ezio Vailati, “Leibniz on Divine Concurrence with Secondary Causes,” *British Journal for the History of Philosophy* (10:2) 2002: 209-230, as well as, Sukjae Lee, “Leibniz on Divine Concurrence,” *The Philosophical Review* (113:2) 2004: 203 – 248.

Self-Revelation and Self-Satisfaction in Montaigne and Descartes

Richard Strier
[Chicago]

"Self-Revelation and Self-Satisfaction in Montaigne and Descartes" considers the odd relation that both of these thinkers have to the issue of humility and repentance. Montaigne is both humble and proud in his self-presentation, and, most of all, is not embarrassed to present any aspect of his existence. His most striking piece along these lines, however, is his essay on repentance ("Du Repentir"), in which he explains why he does not believe in repentance. This is a most remarkable piece, and presents, I think, an extremely interesting and important conception of what a self is, and what it means to have/be one. It presents, as I read it, the idea of self-transformation as, in a deep sense, incoherent. The section of the essay on Descartes is a reading of the Discourse on the Method in terms of Descartes' self-presentation. He alternates between presenting himself as an extraordinary genius and presenting himself as just an ordinary guy who stumbled across a way of getting extraordinary results through the "method." Both of these modes of self-presentation are required by the argument of the work, and the result is a strange mixture of pride and faux- (or methodological) humility. The rejection of humility, in the normal Christian sense, is seen as a deep connection between the two great (apparent) skeptics.