

## 5.3 Individual Substances

### 5.3.1 Readings and Study questions

- Readings: Leibniz, *Discourse on Metaphysics* 8-13
- Study questions:
  1. According to Leibniz, is it possible that you be not a student at IIT this semester? More precisely, in what sense, if any, would it be possible?
  2. How do you understand Leibniz's claim that every substance is like "a mirror [...] of the whole world"?
  3. How does Leibniz defend the notion of substantial form? Whom do you think Leibniz is thinking of when he refers to the "modern philosophy"?
  4. How does Leibniz criticize Descartes' view that extension is the essence of the body?
  5. How does Leibniz reconcile the idea that everything that happens to someone is included in his individual concept with free will? Do you find it convincing?

### 5.3.2 The notion of substance

This is an old notion that has been common vocabulary for philosophy for centuries, even if it has more or less disappeared now. The various notions that the modern philosophers had inherited from the ancient philosophers are:

1. Substance as something whose existence does not depend on anything else
 

Example: 'handicapped': clearly exists but not without something to 'bear' it – you have never seen a handicap moving around by itself

Note that this was Descartes' notion of substance: self-sufficient being
2. Substance as what remains constant under changes
 

The idea is that any being is characterized by

- essential properties
- accidental properties

Typically, that we are humans is essential to us. However, that we are black or white is accidental. It does not define our essence, your nature.

Accidental properties can change without the essential properties to be affected (you can die your skin). What remains the same under all changes is the substance.

### 3. Substance as the subject of predication

Subject and predicate: Jalisco is black

The idea here is that substances are what cannot be predicated. Consider the word 'black'. It can be a subject, as in 'black is beautiful'. However it can also be a predicate, as in 'Jalisco is black'. This is sufficient to say that 'black' is not a substance: substances cannot be predicated of anything. In this sense, Jalisco is a substance.

The three notions are of course linked to one another: something which has an independent existence can remain the same when other things change, and is the subject of these changing predicates.

The notion of substance is very important for the modern philosophers: *to decide what is a substance or not amounts to decide what are the fundamental constituents of the world*, in other words, what kinds of stuff exist and what kind of being they have.

### 5.3.3 Self contained substances in Leibniz' philosophy

#### Self contained substances: what is it?

- This is one of the most controversial, most intriguing, and most interesting thesis that Leibniz holds: *the concept of an individual substance contains in itself all the predicates that the substance has, has had, and will have.*
- Examples:
  - Jalisco
  - Alexander the Great

- So, for Leibniz, a substance is an individual, concrete and complete being, which is completely understood in its concept by God.
- This implies that, according to Leibniz, *there are no accidental properties*.

### Substantial Forms

- What is it?

It is what makes something to be what it is. More concretely, take a cat. The ancient philosophers and the medieval philosophers after them took that what fundamentally makes a cat a cat is its form “cathood”.

The idea was based on the distinction between accidental and essential properties: The form “cathood” is the set of all essential properties of a cat. The accidental properties can change, the essential properties cannot change (or it is not a cat anymore).

A typical example from Aristotle: Humans are essentially alive. Thus, it is part of the substantial form of humans, call it “humanity”, to be alive. Hence, a dead man is not a man anymore.

In the same way, arguably, a broken chair is not a chair anymore.

- Why was it despised?

As far as scientific explanation is concerned, appeals to substantial forms were considered vacuous by the modern philosophers.

Remember Moliere’s example: *The imaginary invalid* 1673

FIRST DOCTOR:

Most learned bachelor

Whom I esteem and honor,

I would like to ask you the cause and reason why

Opium makes one sleep.

ARGAN:

....The reason is that in opium resides

A dormitive virtue,

Of which it is the nature

To stupefy the senses.

CHORUS:

Well, well, well, well has he answered!  
 Worthy, worthy is he to enter  
 Into our learned body.  
 Well, well has he answered!

- Why does Leibniz hold that it is necessary in metaphysics?
  - A principle of unity is necessary to give an account of individuality in our world.
  - Extension, figure and movement (Descartes' notion of bodies) are just not enough to give an account of individual unity.
  - Leibniz thinks the notion of substantial form can do the job.
  - It is useful in order to give an account of things that appear to possess an intrinsic unity, by contrast to things that are mere aggregate, collections of elements.
  - John Cottingham's example p.105: heap of pebbles vs. lobster
  - For Leibniz, every individual has an intrinsic principle of true unity. This applies to everything: not only humans, but to everything: *panpsychism*: everything has a soul (even if, of course, not everything has a mind and consciousness)
  - While in the *Discourse on Metaphysics*, Leibniz appeals to the notions of substantial forms and souls, he will dub his own term to refer to it later: *Monads – literally solitary units*.
  - For Leibniz, *Monads are the fundamental constituents of the world*.

### Characteristics of individual substances

- The principle of indiscernibles
  - Two substances cannot have the same properties and yet differ in number.
  - Each substance is therefore the only instance of its kind!
- Substance do not perish, do not appear naturally – only by creation of God
- Indivisible
- An individual substance expresses the entire universe: it is a perspective on the entire creation

- As such, has something of God's omniscience and omnipotence
  - omniscience: expresses the entire – even if from a limited perspective
  - omnipotence: is part of all other substance and influence their being – even if never by direct action
- What does it mean that they share some of the omnipotence of God?

*Monads are active* – Whenever a monad “changes”, it does it itself. Monads are never influenced by other monads. They are independent of one another. A monad's life is nothing else than the independent development of itself.

Since it “contains” the entire world, monads deploy the entire world in their own development.

*In short then: a substance is an individual, active, concrete and complete being which corresponds to one of the possible perspectives on the universe and was actualized by God's decree.*