

History of Philosophy

39 Leibinz's "Monads"

By Dr. Arthur Holmes of Wheaton College

Abstract:

This text features a lecture by **Dr. Arthur Holmes** regarding the metaphysical system of **Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz**, specifically his theory of **monads**. Holmes explains that Leibniz viewed the universe as a hierarchy of **indestructible units of force** or energy, which possess varying degrees of consciousness and internal drive. Because these monads are "**windowless**," they do not interact through physical cause and effect; instead, their coordinated actions are governed by a **pre-established harmony** sustained by God. The lecture further clarifies how this system attempts to reconcile **mechanistic science** with **Christian theology** by reviving Scholastic concepts like final causation. Ultimately, Holmes details how Leibniz distinguishes between **truths of fact** and **truths of reason**, positioning human spirits as unique mirrors of the divine within a purposeful, unfolding reality.

Briefing Document:

The Metaphysical Framework of Leibniz's Monadology

Executive Summary

Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz's metaphysical system centers on the "monad," an indivisible, indestructible unit of force or energy that serves as the fundamental building block of reality. Leibniz developed this framework to reconcile the emerging 17th-century mechanistic science with Christian theology, specifically opposing the materialism of Hobbes and the naturalistic pantheism of Spinoza.

The system posits a "pre-established harmony" where monads do not causally interact with one another ("windowless") but are synchronized by God. Reality is structured as a hierarchy of being, governed by the principles of continuity, plenitude, and sufficient reason. This briefing examines the nature of monads, the

distinction between mind and body, and the epistemological implications of a world where all knowledge is ultimately innate.

1. The Nature and Attributes of Monads

Leibniz defines monads as the underlying reality beneath the level of appearances. They are characterized by several distinct properties:

- **Indivisibility and Indestructibility:** Because monads are not composites, they cannot be disintegrated by natural means. Their existence is given and sustained by God.
- **Windowless Nature:** Monads have no "windows" through which anything can enter or leave. There is no cause-effect relationship between external stimuli and the internal state of a monad.
- **Internal Activity:** Every monad is "programmed" with its own nature. Its activity is the expression of its own inner potency and direction.
- **The Identity of Indiscernibles:** No two monads are exactly alike. If two things were completely indiscernible, they would be the same thing. Each individual essence contains an infinitesimal difference that distinguishes it from all others.

Key Transcendental Attributes

Leibniz identifies two primary functions that vary by degree across the hierarchy of monads:

Attribute	Definition
Apperception	A degree of awareness ranging from simple "knowing" of one's place in the order of things to conscious sense perception and, in humans, reflective self-consciousness (reason).
Appetition	The internal drive, desire, or directed energy of a monad. This represents final causation, where the monad actualizes the potential of its own essence.

2. The Hierarchy of Being and Universal Principles

Leibniz's universe is a choreographed whole, structured according to a strict scholastic-style hierarchy.

- **The Principle of Continuity:** There are no gaps in the chain of being; every conceivable distinction is represented by infinitesimal degrees.
- **The Principle of Plenitude:** The universe is "filled" or at full capacity; there are no "empty seats" in the hierarchy of existence.
- **The Principle of Sufficient Reason:** There is a specific reason for the existence of every entity and the occurrence of every event within the hierarchy.
- **The Principle of Perfection:** Because the system is an interwoven, harmonized whole manifesting the goodness of God, it is considered the "best of all possible worlds."

God and Fulguration

Unlike the Deist view where God creates a self-operating machine, Leibniz proposes **fulguration**. God is the "power source" who continuously imparts and generates the energy required for a monad's existence. This is a meta-cause that sustains the entire causal series at every stage.

3. Mind, Body, and Mechanistic Science

Leibniz reconciles mechanistic science by limiting its scope to the level of "composites."

The Composition of Bodies

- **Composites:** Physical bodies (matter) are composites of myriads of monads. While individual monads are infinitesimal and lack spatial extension (size, shape, density), their organization into composites creates the appearance of primary qualities.

- **Mechanistic Laws:** Causal relationships (efficient causation) exist between composite bodies. This is where the laws of mechanistic science apply, though they do not describe ultimate reality.
- **The Soul Monad:** In living things, a "soul monad" serves as the unifying, organizing principle (entelechy). It provides the direction-giving function for the body, much as God provides order for the universe.

Pre-established Harmony

Because monads are windowless, there is no causal interaction between the mind (spirit monad) and the body. Instead, they operate in a **parallelism**.

- The soul acts as if there were no body, and the body acts as if there were no soul.
- They appear to influence each other only because God has synchronized them in a pre-established harmony.

4. Epistemology: Truths of Reason vs. Truths of Fact

Leibniz's epistemology is strictly rationalist, asserting that all ideas—including sensory perceptions—are innate and "bubble up" from mental activity rather than external stimuli.

1. **Truths of Reason:** These are logically necessary truths (e.g., definitions, math). They depend on the **Law of Non-Contradiction** (A equals A).
2. **Truths of Fact:** These are contingent truths about successive events. They depend on the **Law of Sufficient Reason**.

Even though "Truths of Fact" appear to depend on external events, the awareness of them is an internal development of the monad's own nature, synchronized with the rest of the universe.

5. Anthropology and the Origin of Souls

Leibniz adopts a view related to **Animalculism** (or Traducianism in theology) regarding the origin of individuals:

- The offspring is contained in miniature (both body and soul) within the "father's seed."
 - **Spirit Monads:** While all animals have "sensitive souls" (allowing for memory and perception), only a "chosen" few are elevated by God to the rank of "spirits."
 - **The Image of God:** Unlike ordinary souls, which are mirrors of the universe, spirits are "images of the divinity itself," capable of self-consciousness, active reasoning, and entering into a "society with God."
-

6. Teleological Freedom

Leibniz rejects the idea of "free will" as a choice made in a causal vacuum (indeterminism). Instead, he defines freedom through **teleology**:

- Human behavior is governed by **final causation** (inner purpose and drive).
- Freedom is the expression of a spirit monad's inner nature (apperception and appetition) working toward its inherent end.
- Leibniz argues that a meaningful concept of freedom must be based on purposive behavior rather than the mere absence of efficient causes.

Study Guide:

Leibniz's Monadology: A Comprehensive Study Guide

This study guide explores the metaphysical system of Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz as presented by Dr. Arthur Holmes. It focuses on the transition from 17th-century mechanistic science to a reality grounded in "monads"—indivisible units of force. The document outlines the hierarchy of being, the relationship between mind and body, and the logical principles governing Leibniz's universe.

1. The Metaphysical Foundation: Monads

Leibniz's philosophy arose as a response to the perceived conflicts between 17th-century mechanistic science and Christian theology. He sought to limit mechanistic science to the level of appearances (phenomena) while establishing a deeper underlying reality composed of **monads**.

Characteristics of Monads

- **Indivisible Units:** Monads are the ultimate constituents of reality. Because they are not composites (made of parts), they cannot be disintegrated or destroyed by natural means.
- **Force and Energy:** Rather than being inert matter, monads are units of force or energy.
- **Dependence on God:** While indestructible by nature, monads are not eternal in the same sense as God. Their existence is continuously granted and sustained by God through a process Leibniz calls **fulguration**.
- **Windowless Nature:** Monads are "windowless," meaning they have no causal connections with one another. There is no external stimulus; all changes, thoughts, and desires arise from within the monad's own internal nature.

The Hierarchy of Being

Leibniz describes a "chain of being" where every monad is unique but related to others by degree. This hierarchy is defined by two primary attributes:

1. **Apperception:** The degree of consciousness or self-awareness. This ranges from the "bare monad" (knowing its place without consciousness) to "spirit monads" (human self-consciousness and reason) to God (perfect awareness).
2. **Appetition:** The internal drive, desire, or directed energy of a monad to actualize its own nature or potency.

Monad Type	Level of Apperception	Characteristics
------------	-----------------------	-----------------

Supreme Monad (God)	Perfect Apperception	Perfect self-understanding and awareness of everything.
Spirit Monads	Self-Consciousness	Capable of reason, reflection, and active interrelation of ideas.
Soul Monads	Sense Perception	Found in animals; capable of memory and conditioned behavior.
Bare Monads	Unconscious Order	Manifest the intelligible order and function within the hierarchy.

2. Universal Principles and Logic

Leibniz employs several philosophical principles to explain the structure and goodness of the universe.

- **Principle of Continuity:** There are no gaps in the hierarchy of being; every conceivable distinction is represented.
 - **Principle of Plenitude:** The universe is "filled" or "full." There are no "empty seats" in the chain of being.
 - **Principle of Sufficient Reason:** There is a specific reason for everything that exists and every event that occurs within the hierarchy.
 - **Identity of Indiscernibles:** If two things are completely indiscernible from one another, they are not two separate things but the same thing. Every individual monad must differ from every other by at least some infinitesimal degree.
 - **Pre-established Harmony:** Since monads do not interact causally, God has choreographed the universe so that all monads function in perfect synchronization. This leads to the conclusion that this is the "best of all possible worlds."
-

3. Mind, Body, and Knowledge

The Mind-Body Problem

In Leibniz's system, the mind and body do not interact (unlike Descartes' view). Instead, they operate in a **parallelism** maintained by God.

- **Bodies as Composites:** Physical bodies are composites of myriads of monads. While individual monads lack spatial extension (size, shape, density), their collection as a composite creates the phenomenon of extension and primary qualities.
- **The Unifying Principle:** A living body is organized and unified by a "soul monad" (or spirit monad in humans), which acts as the source of life and direction for the composite.
- **Mechanistic Science:** Mechanistic laws of cause and effect apply to the behavior of these composite bodies (the phenomenal level) but do not apply to the underlying monads.

Epistemology: Two Kinds of Truth

Leibniz distinguishes between knowledge derived from facts and knowledge derived from logic. Because monads are windowless, both types of truth are technically innate, arising from internal mental activity rather than external stimuli.

1. **Truths of Fact:** These are contingent truths about historical events or successive occurrences. They depend on the Law of Sufficient Reason.
2. **Truths of Reason:** These are logically necessary truths (e.g., definitions, mathematics). They depend on the Law of Non-Contradiction; to deny them would be to suggest a contradiction.

4. Review Quiz

Instructions: Provide a short-answer response (2-3 sentences) for each question based on the source text.

1. How does Leibniz define a "monad"?
2. What does Leibniz mean when he describes monads as "windowless"?
3. Explain the "Principle of Plenitude" within Leibniz's hierarchy of being.

4. How does the concept of "fulguration" describe the relationship between God and monads?
5. What is the "Identity of Indiscernibles"?
6. Distinguish between "apperception" and "perception" in the context of spirit monads.
7. How does Leibniz explain the existence of physical bodies if monads themselves lack spatial extension?
8. What is the "Pre-established Harmony"?
9. According to Leibniz, what is the difference between "Truths of Fact" and "Truths of Reason"?
10. How does Leibniz's view of human freedom differ from a simple "efficient causation" model?

5. Answer Key

1. **Definition of Monads:** A monad is an indivisible unit of force or energy that serves as the underlying reality of everything that exists. Because they are not composites, they are indestructible by natural means and possess varying degrees of consciousness and drive.
2. **Windowless Nature:** To call a monad "windowless" means it has no causal connections to anything outside of itself and cannot be affected by external stimuli. All ideas, sensations, and desires are innate and emerge from the monad's own internal nature and resources.
3. **Principle of Plenitude:** This principle asserts that the creation is entirely full and that there are no "empty seats" or gaps in the chain of being. Every possible degree of existence is occupied by a monad, ensuring a complete and interwoven hierarchy.
4. **Fulguration:** Fulguration is the process by which God continuously generates and infuses energy and existence into monads. Rather than a one-time act of creation where things become self-operative, God is viewed as the constant power source sustaining the monads' existence.

5. **Identity of Indiscernibles:** This principle states that if two things were completely identical in every quality, they would be one and the same entity rather than two distinct things. Therefore, every monad in the universe must differ from every other monad by at least an infinitesimal degree.
6. **Apperception vs. Perception:** While perception refers to simple sensory awareness of particulars, apperception involves self-consciousness and the ability to reflect on one's own mental states. Humans (spirit monads) possess apperception, allowing them to reason actively and interrelate ideas.
7. **Physical Bodies and Extension:** Individual monads are infinitesimal and do not occupy space, but when millions of them are organized into composites, they take on spatial extension and primary qualities. This allows for the operation of mechanistic science at the level of bodies, even though the underlying monads are non-spatial units of force.
8. **Pre-established Harmony:** This is the system where God has synchronized the internal activities of all windowless monads so they appear to interact, though they do not. It results in a perfectly choreographed universe where souls and bodies act as if they influence each other.
9. **Truths of Fact vs. Reason:** Truths of reason are logically necessary and based on the law of non-contradiction, such as mathematical definitions. Truths of fact are contingent, relating to historical or successive events, and are governed by the law of sufficient reason.
10. **Human Freedom:** Leibniz rejects the idea of freedom as a causal vacuum (indeterminism) and instead proposes a teleological view. Freedom is defined through "final causation," where human actions are driven by internal purposes, appetites, and the individual's unique nature.

6. Essay Questions

1. Compare and contrast Leibniz's "Parallelism" with the mind-body theories of Descartes and Spinoza, specifically focusing on the role of causal interaction.
2. Discuss the role of God in Leibniz's Monadology, focusing on the concepts of the Supreme Monad, fulguration, and the pre-established harmony.

3. Analyze the "windowless" metaphor. If monads cannot be influenced by external stimuli, how does Leibniz account for the appearance of a shared, interactive reality?
 4. Evaluate Leibniz's attempt to reconcile mechanistic science with a religious metaphysical framework. In what way does he "limit" the role of science?
 5. Examine the hierarchy of being in Leibniz's thought. How do the concepts of appetite and apperception define the status of "bare monads" versus "spirit monads"?
-

7. Glossary of Key Terms

- **Animalculism:** The 17th-century biological view that an offspring is contained in miniature, both body and soul, within the father's seed.
- **Apperception:** Self-consciousness or reflective awareness; the capacity to reflect on one's own consciousness.
- **Appetition:** The internal drive, desire, or inclination of a monad to move from one state to another; its "directed energy."
- **Composite:** A thing made of parts; in Leibniz's system, bodies are composites of many monads.
- **Efficient Cause:** The agent or event that brings about a change or effect (the "push" behind an action).
- **Final Cause:** The purpose, goal, or end toward which a thing is naturally directed (teleology).
- **Fulguration:** The continuous process of God generating and imparting existence and energy to monads.
- **Hykaeotas (Thisness):** A principle of individuality (introduced by Duns Scotus) suggesting each individual has a unique essence that distinguishes it from others.
- **Infinitesimal:** Incalculably or infinitely small; used by Leibniz to describe the non-measurable "size" of monads that eventually compose extended bodies.

- **Monad:** An indivisible, indestructible unit of force or energy that constitutes the ultimate reality of all things.
- **Parallelism:** The theory that mental and physical events occur in synchronization but without direct causal interaction between the two.
- **Phenomenal:** Relating to the level of appearances or how things seem to be (e.g., mechanistic science), as opposed to the underlying metaphysical reality.
- **Pre-established Harmony:** The belief that God has perfectly synchronized the activities of all monads so that the universe functions as a choreographed whole.
- **Traducianism:** The theological view that the soul is transmitted from the parents to the child through the biological process of conception.
- **Vitalism:** The philosophical view that life is a distinct force or principle that cannot be reduced to purely physical or chemical components.