

Leibniz to Friedrich Bierling (excerpts)¹

Translated by Donald Rutherford

Hanover, 12 August 1711

You ask about spiritual, or rather incorporeal, things and say that we see the mechanical arrangement of parts but not the principles of mechanism. That is correct, but since we also see motion, we understand from this the cause of motion, or force. The source of mechanism is primitive force, but the laws of motion, according to which impetus or derivative forces arise from it, flow from the perception of good and evil or from that which is most fitting [*convenientissimum*]. For this reason, just as efficient causes depend on final causes and spiritual things are prior by nature to material things, so also are they prior for us in thought, since we perceive the soul (private to us) more intimately than the body, as Plato and Descartes also recognized. You say that this force is known through effects, not such as it is in itself. I reply that this would be the case if we did not have a soul or did not know it. The soul has in itself perception and appetite, and these are included in its nature. And just as in the body we understand antitypy and shape in general, although we are ignorant of the shape of insensible bodies, so in the soul we understand perception and appetite, although we do not know distinctly the insensible ingredients of the confused perceptions in which the insensibles of bodies are expressed. You say that spiritual things are sensed as air, wind and light, and that therefore they are not yet fully known. But for me, air, wind and light seem to be no more spiritual than running water, nor do they differ from it except in subtlety. Spirits, souls, and in general, simple substances or monads cannot be apprehended by the senses or the imagination since they lack parts. You ask whether I believe that there are bodies which are not seen. Why shouldn't I believe this? In fact, I think, on the contrary, that this cannot be doubted. Through a microscope we see other insensible little animals and the organs of these little animals, and perhaps other little animals which are being born in their humors cannot be seen. The detail of nature proceeds to infinity.

Finally, you seek definitions of matter, body and spirit. *Matter* is that which consists in antitypy, or that which resists being penetrated; and thus bare matter is merely passive. *Body*, however, has an active force in addition to matter. But a *body* is either a corporeal substance or a mass assembled from corporeal substances. I call a *corporeal substance* that which consists in a simple substance or monad (i.e. a soul or soul-analogue) and a united organic body. But a *mass* is an aggregate of corporeal substances, just as a cheese sometimes consists of a confluence of worms. In addition, a *monad* or substance that is simple in kind contains perception and appetition, and is either primitive and *God*, who is the ultimate reason of things, or is derivative, namely a created monad; and the latter is either a *mind* endowed with reason, or a *soul* endowed with sense, or a *soul-analogue* endowed with some inferior grade of perception and appetite. For the latter, the term 'monad' alone suffices, since we do not know its various grades. But every monad is inextinguishable, for simple substances cannot begin or end except

¹ GP VII 501-2, 502-3, 503-4.

through creation or annihilation, that is, a miracle. And every created monad is also endowed with some organic body, according to which it perceives and strives, although through births and deaths this is altered, enveloped, transformed, and continues in a perpetual flux. Moreover, monads contain in themselves an entelechy or primitive force, and without them matter would be merely passive. And any mass contains innumerable monads, for although any one organic body in nature has its corresponding monad, it nevertheless contains in its parts other monads endowed in the same way with organic bodies subservient to the primary monad; and the whole of nature is nothing else, for it is necessary that every aggregate result from simple substances as if from genuine elements. But atoms or extended bodies, even infrangible ones, are fictitious entities, which cannot be explained except through a miracle and lack a reason; nor ought the causes of forces and motions be given in terms of them. And even if they should be conceded, they would not be truly simple, by virtue of the fact that they are extended and endowed with parts. And so, I have responded to your questions and explained my view, as much as is possible briefly and in a letter.

Hanover, 14 January 1712

On reviewing my letters I see that I still owe you a reply, so I do not want to delay any longer. You relate light to spiritual things and deny that its resistance, which for me is a sign of corporeality, can be conceived on the basis of this. But what, I ask, are refractions and reflections unless effects of resistance? Certain recent authors of a crass philosophy have imagined that such things can be spiritual. But light is no more active than rushing water, save that it is finer and moving faster. Finally, it is objected that matter is not active in itself. What then? It is enough that it be active once motion is imparted to it. And undoubtedly, as soon as it was created it was in a vigorous motion, and once force is received it is always retained; for force is never lost, but is only transferred, distributed and collected. Nor does light compel us to resort to atoms any more than does any other fluid. Nor should monads be confused with atoms. Atoms (which are imagined) have figure; monads no more have figure than do souls: they are not parts of bodies, but requisites.

Hanover, 16 March 1712

You will forgive me that I do not always respond immediately, for you know how busy I am.

You seem to have considered carefully my opinion concerning the nature and difference between spiritual and material things. Anything that has parts is corporeal. Spirits are endowed with an intelligence and survive the dissolution of the body, although I am also inclined toward this—that I believe that created spirits, though incorporeal in themselves, are nevertheless always endowed with some body, and neither intelligences nor souls exist completely separate from any body.