

# *LEIBNIZ AND MARITAIN ON THE QUESTION OF IMMORTALITY*

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## **I.**

In his essay “The Immortality Of Man”<sup>1</sup> Maritain writes that the problem of personal immortality lies beyond the realm of human reason. While the immortality of the human soul can be hinted at philosophically, philosophy is unable to explain personal immortality. The seventeenth century figure, Leibniz, on the other hand, also concerned to reconcile philosophy with Christian belief, and more effectively silence atheists, seems to provide a needed corrective enhancement to Maritain’s position. He maintains by contrast that “all souls, all simple created substances are always joined to a body, and that there never are entirely separate souls.” (*Nouveaux Essais, Preface*)

In his account of the immaterial soul, Maritain draws on the substantial root of the human faculty of intelligence, since intellectual operations cannot be explained by any physical organ as the source of the activity.<sup>2</sup> Maritain’s first conclusion that there are immaterial souls with immaterial faculties is unproblematic, as far as it goes. However, the account of the immaterial soul that emerges within the same context is too narrow.

In his second conclusion, the problem becomes rather more obvious. Maritain, adopting the Aristotelian notion of soul as *entelechy* or the moving force of the body, concludes that “the immaterial soul is not only a spirit but a spirit made for animating a body... its union with matter constitutes a particular corporeal

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<sup>1</sup> Jacques Maritain, “The Immortality of Man.” in *Man’s Destiny in Eternity. The Garvin Lectures*, Boston: The Beacon Press, 1949.

<sup>2</sup> See *ibid.*, pp. 31-33.

substance, the human being.”<sup>3</sup> From a Leibnizian viewpoint, such a notion of entelechy has limitations which I wish to address in this paper. It leaves open the problem of how to account for the souls of animals or other entelechies.<sup>4</sup> It also leads to the conception of matter as sterile save for the immaterial souls made for animating bodies.

Maritain argues that a soul not only has an immaterial faculty of intelligence, but powers and activities that are organic and material. In drawing on the Aristotelian distinction between material and immaterial souls, Maritain only discusses the connection soul and body in the case of the human organism.<sup>5</sup> As a result, the ultimate nature of created substances in the divine scheme of things remains inadequately addressed. Its most significant implication is that all other material forms of life are *mere* automatons and, moreover, leaves the actual communication between material and immaterial souls unclear.

In Maritain’s scheme, body exists and has its own laws, but spirit (the immaterial soul) is completely immaterial. In order to explain the interaction between spirit (rational souls) and body (matter), I claim that he interposes a quasi-material soul. In Cartesian philosophy we have a similar context: mind and body are two distinct substances. Maritain’s material soul is an intermediate between the two distinct substances. The material soul, quasi-material and quasi-spiritual, appears to be an assumption for which Maritain has no argument. Such pseudo-material souls do not appear either in the Cartesian or Aristotelian explanatory scheme. The introduction of pseudo-material souls is not only a weak attempt to bridge the separation between minds and bodies, it widens the sphere for a host of old dilemmas that both modern and ancient philosophers have been concerned to avoid.

These material souls are neither intelligent forces in the human rational sense nor are they merely bodies without souls. We have here a double problem: not only must we now account for the reality and endurance of these pseudo-material souls, but also how they operate. The immaterial minds or rational souls interact with the body via the pseudo-material souls. The relation of souls and bodies is somehow indeterminate. The atheists from Leibniz’s day would simply point out the security in explaining things using efficient causes and leave such wholesale metaphysical obscurities to faith. A scientist of modern times would be inclined to agree with the corpuscular philosophers of Leibniz’s day.

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<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 33.

<sup>4</sup> Cf. Leibniz, *The Monadology and Other Philosophical Writings*. Tr. Robert Latta, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1971, § 14.

<sup>5</sup> Cf. Jacques Maritain, “The Immortality of Man,” p. 33.

Is this apparent schism between faith, science and philosophy warranted?

## II.

Let us first consider Maritain's notions of objective, subjective, and personal immortality.

1. Subjective immortality is the notion that we as individuals live on in the memories of others. This is essentially Comte's view. According to Maritain, this is not true immortality. In order to be true immortality, it has to be rooted in objective immortality. There have to be immortal individual minds to remember other individuals eternally.

2. Objective immortality is then the notion that there are so-called individual immortal souls. And we know that this is the case from the simple objective phenomenon that there are immaterial minds. Immortal immaterial minds are carriers of individual impressions. They are the substrate of identity and individuality.

3. Personal immortality is the notion that the individual Person with body and mind is immortal. Objective immortality is the key notion to explaining both subjective and personal immortality.

In Maritain's view, subjective and objective immortality are one and the same. We start with the notion that there are many immaterial minds or souls and these are spirits with personal histories. We here assume, as Maritain does, that the human soul is naturally made to animate a body.<sup>6</sup> Since the immaterial soul is a spirit made for animating a body, in Aristotelian terms, an *entelechy* or substantial form, it has in addition to immaterial faculties, powers and activities that are organic and material. It is the union of this *entelechy* with matter that makes up a particular corporeal substance, the human being. The immaterial souls are simple. What is simple has no parts. That which is without parts cannot decompose. Therefore, souls are immortal. (This is essentially a Platonic style argument.) These immaterial and immortal substances are human souls and interact with bodies via the material souls. The function of the material soul is to control the body and the function of the rational soul is to interact with the body, through the material soul. The material soul dies along with the body.

Where there are no rational spirits there is no process which sustains material souls or matter beyond the life of the body. The material soul is the entity that is introduced to bridge the Cartesian gap between mind and matter. It is also key to explaining how the soul survives the death of a physical body. We have no explanation to account for these facts, and a very weak argument for the

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<sup>6</sup> Cf. Jacques Maritain, "The Immortality of Man," p. 33.

distinction between rational and material souls. In addition, Maritain's introspective argument is not sufficient reason to assume that there are individual immaterial souls. It takes the following course:

First point: "The objects known by human intelligence, taken. . . precisely as objects determining intelligence and united with it, are immaterial."

Second point: "The object of human intelligence is as such immaterial; the act of the human intelligence is also immaterial."

Third point: "The radical immateriality of the highest operations of the human soul, of intellectual knowledge, of contemplation, of suprasensuous love and desire and joy, of free will, is evidence that the soul is spiritual in itself and cannot cease existing and living."

The introspective argument appeals to our everyday intuitive notions of "intelligence." Our common intuition of "intelligence" is empirical in nature. As such, the introspective argument which appeals to our inner experience of the human self, can at best suggest the immateriality of human mind and its faculties. However, it is too weak to sustain the burden of proof of immortality on objective grounds.

After carefully developing arguments in favour of the immateriality of the soul, Maritain concludes that the natural life of a natural soul in a disembodied state would be meagre and shadowy. The natural life of a disembodied soul does not constitute the notion of a person. "The notion of a Person (individual human/rational soul) is essentially the notion of a complete and perfect whole."<sup>7</sup> The notion of a person is one which integrates the unity of mind and body. A person is not truly complete without a body. "The body integrates the natural human totality, and the soul is only a part. What would be the life of separated souls, if they had to lead a merely natural life?" Maritain correctly observes, at this point, that the notion of disembodied spirits is unsatisfying and incomplete. Personal or subjective immortality cannot be consistently maintained by separating spirit from matter. The life of disembodied spirits is impoverished without bodies because without a body the soul cannot realize its *telos*. What defines the soul's individuality as rational or animal or spirit in any given sense is its *telos*. If we insist on the existence of many souls or spirits, then we must explain what makes them individually different from other natural spirits, how the *telos* of a human soul is different compared to other souls. And more importantly we need to explain why death is not the total separation of the soul from its individuality. In order to achieve this goal we must first define what a soul is, what a body is and how they interact.

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<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 34.

Maritain's scheme cannot fully achieve this goal. It radically separates spirit from matter, and applies the notion of *entelechy* too narrowly only to personal immortality. Although he recognizes souls as simple substances and spirits meant for animating a body, he is disquieted by the natural condition of souls perceived philosophically. That we are individuals even in our natural condition can, contrary to Maritain's opinion, be used in support of Immortality and Christian faith on more rational grounds.

### III.

#### A) *The immortality of the human mind; incorporeal causes and the first cause*

In his *The Confessions of Nature Against Atheists*<sup>8</sup> written in 1669, Leibniz seeks to demonstrate that corporeal phenomena cannot be explained without an incorporeal principle, i.e. a First cause, or God. His central thesis is this: If everything can be derived from the nature of bodies and its primary qualities such as magnitude, figure and motion, then the origin of these primary qualities must be found in the nature of the bodies themselves. Have we, however, sufficient cause to assume this stance? If it be demonstrated that the origin of primary qualities cannot be found in the essence of body, then our definition of bodies will be shown to rest on an ungrounded assumption.<sup>9</sup> The Atheists or corpuscular philosophers of Leibniz's time rigorously maintain that bodies can be explained without assuming incorporeal causes, that they could not find God nor immortality of the soul by natural reason. Such matters of faith, they conclude must rest either on civil laws or on historical records.<sup>10</sup>

Leibniz, in response to these claims examines the anatomy of bodies, to find out whether sensory appearances can be explained without assuming an incorporeal cause. We call body a thing which exists in space and what we find in space we call a body. The definition of a body rests on the two terms "space" and "to exist in". Based on this definition we claim that a body has a given magnitude and figure according to the space it occupies and fills. The primary qualities such as magnitude, figure and motion rest on the definition of bodies, and the definition of bodies rests on primary qualities. In either case we the explanation for why a body has a particular shape, figure or velocity cannot be derived from the definition that a body is a thing which exists in space and has qualities. In every case we either always assume the body in question *per*

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<sup>8</sup> Cf. Leibniz, *Philosophical Papers and Letters*. Ed. Leroy E. Loemker, 2nd ed, Dordrecht, Holland: D. Reidel Publishing Company, 1969, pp. 109-112.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid*, p. 110.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid*.

*definitionem* to have been a given way, square or round, or any other way, or we study the particular qualities of a body in relation to another proceeding ad infinitum, i.e. indeterminately.

Leibniz concludes that in order to explain why a body is the way it is we need something over and above matter. The explanation for why bodies by nature are disposed in one way and not another cannot be derived from their definition. Nor can we derive the explanation for the absence or presence of particular tendencies from a mere definition. Therefore, to explain the nature of bodies we need to assume a cause outside of bodies. Since there is no reason which occurs in the bodies to explain their nature, the reason which endows them with a particular nature or disposition must be an incorporeal cause, (Being) and not a body. This incorporeal Being must be a mind ruling the whole world, the first cause i.e. God.

***B) Atoms as forces in motion and the ultimate elements of compound bodies***

The existence of simple indivisible corpuscles or atoms is established as part of the same causal proof stated above. This pertains to the explanation of first, motion and, second, properties that constitute firmness, viz. cohesion, resistance and reflection observed of bodies, but cannot be derived from the definition of body or bodies left to themselves. Here Leibniz attempts to demonstrate that all such properties presuppose a basic unity of individual parts holding the combinations of these parts together. He also points out that we may, like the corpuscular philosophers, assume indivisible simple atoms as ultimate elements of bodies which “by their varied shapes, variously combined bring about qualities in sensible bodies”.<sup>11</sup> However, the reason why the individual atoms ultimately cohere cannot be their perpetual reaction or motion, but rather an *adherence* of parts through motion and reaction. Adherence implies a fundamental unity or harmony of parts. For, we always assume that these atoms are moving entities and are being moved by each other within a combined whole of indivisible, simple atoms. We have now arrived at the following position: (i.) That there are indivisible, simple, atoms that are moving forces, (ii.) which when combined bring about qualities in sensible bodies (aggregata, or compounds of the *Monadology*). (iii.) There is a transference of force (intercommunication) between the individual atoms such that there is a unity preserved through the motion of bodies as a whole unit of parts. We do not assume “hooks and more hooks” holding the parts of bodies together to infinity.<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> Cf. *Ibid.*, p. 112.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*

***C) Are the indivisible atoms, as ultimate elements of bodies, physical entities?***

For Leibniz the atoms as the ultimate indivisible elements of physical bodies are representations of Monads. The ultimate reason why bodies, both physical and organic, have particular properties cannot be explained qua bodies themselves. The ultimate explanation for the unity of bodies existing in space and time is Monadic relations. Physical and organic bodies exist in space and time. Whatever exists in space and time is made up of parts. Whatever is made up of parts is divisible ad infinitum. To explain the individuality of bodies as bodies there has to be an underlying unity. The unifying principles of bodies are ultimately Monads, souls or simple substances. The unifying principles of bodies cannot exist in space. If they did they would be subject to infinite division. “[...] to be in space is the definition of a body.” Since the unifying principles are not in space they are not movable, “for motion is change of space.” Whatever does not change its location cannot be dissipated, “for dissolution is the motion of a part” but not utter and complete destruction of parts themselves. By the same argument Leibniz establishes the immortality of minds or souls, and the indestructibility of physical parts as parts. The principle of unity in the external world results from the inherent unity of each individual Monad.

A modified version of the argument that dissolution is the motion of a part but not complete destruction of parts occurs in the Monadology. Leibniz accounts for change in terms of change of the internal composition of bodies. The internal compositions of bodies are the physical changes; these are ultimately rooted in the perceptions of the Monads. Change cannot account for unity of things, neither can time or space. Any change also includes the perception of that change. Perception is the very notion of change, and implies both perceptible and imperceptible change, external and internal change. Perceptible change, then, is not only the dissolution of gross bodies, but the re-arrangement of bodies in terms of their constituent parts. While the disintegration of a physical body is the practical death of a body as a composite whole, the parts persist. The persistence of parts as unities can be explained in terms of eternal Monadic relations, the rational, objective structures.

***D) The immortality of souls***

As already noted, Leibniz expounds the immortality of souls, rational souls (esprit) and ordinary souls (animal, plants, animalcules, bare Monads) based on the indissolubility of parts. All souls, he states, are indestructible; including rational minds and other ordinary souls. This is because whatever is without parts is indestructible, is a simple unity. Whatever is indissoluble is not subject to changes affecting physical bodies. The indissoluble is incorruptible. Minds

or souls in general are not subject to either internal or external dissolution of parts. As indissoluble unities they are incorruptible or not subject to decay. By these arguments souls are immortal. The argument of the simplicity of souls, originally found in Plato's *Phaedo*, is used by both Maritain and Leibniz. Although Maritain, we observed earlier in this paper, concludes that a Person is not truly complete without a body. Leibniz, by contrast, connects the idea of the natural life of souls with the notion of a Person and individuality. For him a soul in any state is an individual, spiritual or substantial unity, i.e. a Monad endowed with reason. If it were not, it would not be a soul. Leibniz gives the name *soul* or *entelechy* to everything having perceptions and desires in general.

All souls are Monads or simple substances or entelechies. Monads, or living souls, are the ultimate foundation of reality. The essential characteristic of souls is their individual unity. Leibniz call souls Monads, a name derived from the ancient Greek word for unity (*monas*). In Leibniz's metaphysics there are substances (or souls) and their accidents (or modifications of substances). The world we normally see exists only as a secondary or *derivative* reality as Monadic aggregates (things, composites) or entelechies (living organisms). A living organism is not just moved by physical force, it is essentially a moving force. The efficiency of our universe can only completely be understood when conceived as a goal-directed activity, i.e. appetitions, or in terms of final causes, i.e. Monads. This is because we attribute life to material forms of Reality and its processes. The machines of nature are endowed with life, perception and consciousness; they are not merely mechanical configurations in perpetual motion.

There are many souls as there are many Monads. Life persists even in the smallest particle of matter (animalcules). In it, Leibniz remarks, "there is a world of creatures, living beings, animals entelechies, souls."<sup>13</sup> We speak of life, perception and consciousness extending from the minutest and most imperceptible to the most obvious. This applies to the human body which has a dominant entelechy or a Monad, mind or soul. The Monads are animating principles of bodies. Since souls or minds are Monads, and the Monads are animating principles of bodies, nothing in the universe is ever without a body. The principle of unity in the external world is a function of the inherent unity of each individual Monad. A soul without body would be a soul without any relation to other Monads.<sup>14</sup> Monadic relations are the variety of perceptions contained in our universe. They include perceptions of bodies, since *derivative*

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<sup>13</sup> Leibniz, *Monadology*, Tr. Latta, §66.

<sup>14</sup> See *Ibid.*, §72.

reality, the world we see and experience, exists as composite representations of Monadic relations. “Each simple [created] substance has relations which express all others and consequently that it is a living mirror of the universe”.<sup>15</sup> Simple substances or Monads are, then, nothing but perspectives upon a single universe.

What distinguishes rational souls from ordinary ones is the use of Reason and the ability to draw on necessary truths by the use of reason alone which “raises us to the knowledge of ourselves and of God”.<sup>16</sup> Both animals and humans are endowed with memory. The body which belongs to the soul is the physical medium as it were through which the universe is represented in the soul. The universe is rationally structured and unified by Monads or souls and accordingly represented in Monadic configurations. Although the body is organic and continually changing or developing, the Monad or the soul (entelechy) of the body maintains the unity of the parts through the growth and change of the body. As a result, the soul is never all at once deprived of its individuality or identity or substantial form.

There is what Leibniz calls metamorphosis in animals but never *metempsychosis* (transmigration) of souls. All changes are gradual and since there are never any disembodied souls, nor are there unembodied spirits (minds), it follows that there is no such thing as absolute death. For, if this were the case, then all potential dispositions and passive tendencies would never exist in some definite form or the other. The conception of human nature or nature of any kind would be rendered an absolutely impossible act. There would principally be no *form* existing that could actually attain human nature.

#### IV.

Leibniz’s metaphysics provides a fertile terrain on which religious beliefs can be harvested (on rational grounds). His metaphysics can be said to accommodate the Christian notion of resurrection which appears to have been the cause of Maritain’s separation between faith and reason. Our last problem, then, concerns the place of God and resurrection in Leibniz’s philosophy. The entire created universe of Monadic perceptions and representations is pre-conceived in the mind of God. The mind of God is that which actualizes all existing possibilities. The world expresses the greatest variety of possible states with the fewest number of basic principles. God also takes the greatest account of minds (Monads) for they express the greatest variety in terms of nature, end, virtue and function.

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<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, §56; cf. Leibniz, *Théodicée*, 130, 360.

<sup>16</sup> cf. Leibniz, *Monadology*, §29 and *Nouveaux Essais*.

With respect to the immortal souls they are indestructible by virtue of their simplicity. There is no fear of dissolution because births are “growths and developments” and deaths are “diminutions and envelopments”.<sup>17</sup> Leibniz’s characterizations of immortal life, in keeping with the old Platonic argument in the *Phaedo*, imply both pre-existence and existence after death. Would this mean that the life of the human being is subject to birth and rebirth like all other life forms? Leibniz maintains consistently that the soul is the form or animating force of its body. This being the case it cannot be attached to any body other than the original one. Leibniz conceives of the soul Monad as that animating principle which conserves the information about its organic body. The function of monads, in modern terms, is reminiscent of genetic codes, which are the information of a potential organic body existing in a concentrated form. The monads differ from genetic codes in that they preserve the entire life-history of a particular individual existence. From this view-point no form is robbed of its essential identity.

By assuming a difference between the material soul (animal soul) and the immaterial soul (a spirit), Maritain runs into conflict with respect to the doctrine of the Resurrection of the body. If the material soul dies with the body, at the Last Judgement God must create an entirely new body and material soul for the spirit to inhabit. This seems difficult to distinguish from the metempsychosis which Maritain claims that he is concerned to avoid.<sup>18</sup> This problem, on the other hand, does not exist for Leibniz: God simply arranges the world such that a hierarchy of Monads, similar to the hierarchy of my original body, is reconstructed at Last Judgement. There is no transmigration of souls in the strict sense because this reconstituted body is not a new body inhabited by an old soul: it is the re-establishment of an old structure or hierarchy using different materials (or possibly even the same ones). Leibniz avoids schisms and reconciles both natural and Judaeo-Christian immortality without any divine fiat or interference required to re-animate the body. It is a simpler, more rational explanation. It emphasizes the continuity between human and animal kingdoms and avoids Maritain’s problem: that his version of immortality is just metempsychosis with the intervention of God.

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<sup>17</sup> Leibniz, *Monadology*, Tr. Latta, §§ 4-6, § 73.

<sup>18</sup> Maritain, “The Immortality of Man”, pp. 35-39.