

# From leibniz: letters to arnauld



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Leibniz's Letter to Arnauld

The primary argument of Leibniz's letters to Arnauld is to determine the true nature of material objects. Leibniz argues that they are not actually a single substance, but are instead combinations of things that act in unity in a given scenario or plane of existence. In exploring his ideas that all substantial things are already present from the original moment of creation, Leibniz addresses a question asked by Arnauld regarding how a single block of marble, as a substantial substance, can be considered such once it has been broken in two. He states, " I think that a block of marble is, perhaps, only like a pile of stones, and thus cannot pass as a single substance, but as an assemblage of many" (215). As he makes his case for his way of reasoning, Leibniz's argument is seen to be based upon the Scholastic concept of the substantial form as something existential from the material element.

To try to make his point, Leibniz introduces a number of examples of

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substances that might be considered the same, but that are obviously not a single entity as proofs that his claim regarding the block of marble is correct. He starts his analogies by comparing the substance of diamonds, pointing out how two diamonds are made from the same substance, but are not the same entity even when they are forced together such as when they are placed in the setting of a ring. The one that makes the most sense to me is the one in which he compares the concept of a lake full of fish to the idea of the substantial form. He says, “ Therefore, I hold that a block of marble is not a complete single substance, any more than the water in a pond together with all the fish it contains would be, even if all the water and all the fish were frozen” (215). Obviously, fish are not the same substance as water, even when they are frozen to the same degree as the water, and yet it can be understood how a block chiseled from this pond might be considered by some to be a single substance, i. e. a block of ice. While these are all physical examples of what Leibniz is trying to discuss, he attempts to point out that the important element is missing, the unifying structure in the example that forces change in one area to affect the rest equally. A diamond might be chipped off of a larger diamond, effecting change on both, but this change is not universal to either – only the face being chipped is affected. He sets these base examples against the example of man and the greater community as something that has reached a higher plane of existence. Man is not as easily categorized in the simple terms of the diamond or the pond as he interacts within the body of a group. “ These [groups such as armies or societies] are moral beings, beings in which there is something imaginary and dependent on the fabrication (fiction) of our mind” (216). In the example of the human equation, Leibniz insists that there is something greater,

something indivisible and indestructible because it cannot be located in the physical plane to be destroyed or divided. This is because “ its notion includes everything that will happen to it, something which can be found neither in shape nor in motion (both of which involve something imaginary ...), but which can be found in a soul or substantial form, on the model of what is called me” (216). As a result of this assessment, Leibniz suggests that only those things that fall within this category can be considered substantial beings. This relates back to Plato’s theory of the forms, in which nothing actually visible on Earth to the human eye is in its pure state but is merely viewed as shallowly as if it were silhouettes parading past on an obscuring screen. According to Leibniz, the defining difference is whether or not the substance has an element of the metaphysical, something that cannot be grasped simply by the material form of a substance.

In bringing his thought this far, Leibniz is stalled by the consideration of what exactly comprises a substantial form. If a substantial form must carry with it some sense of the otherworldly, such that it cannot be dealt with from the material plane, then it is difficult to ascertain whether other elements such as rocks, trees or animals can also be considered substantial forms. It would seem that in these cases, he might assign substantiality to the forms of the animals and plants but not to the rocks and soils. He says, “ I assign substantial forms to all corporeal substances that are more than mechanically united” (216). As a result, it depends upon his understanding of the plants and animals before one can say definitively that he might give these substantial distinctions. This, in itself, suggests there is some weight to Leibniz’s argument as individual understanding plays such an important role in assigning designations to elements. “ If I am asked in particular what I say

about the sun, the earthly globe, the moon, trees, and other similar bodies, and even about beasts, I cannot be absolutely certain whether they are animated, or even whether they are substances, or, indeed, whether they are simply machines or aggregates of several substances” (216). He determines that since everything can be divided into aggregate matter and conglomerations of various substances that sometimes work together to create something different, “ we would never reach anything about which we could say, here is truly a being, unless we found animated machines whose soul or substantial form produced a substantial unity independent of the external union arising from contact” (216). Since nothing else other than man was known at that time to have such a connection, Leibniz arrives at the conclusion that there is actually nothing else substantial in the visible world other than mankind itself.