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“Leibnizian Aggregates are not Mind-Dependent Entities”

In Leibniz’s mature thought, a material body is like a herd of sheep: a plurality of entities that, for reasons of convenience, our mind treats as a single object. In a passage from the ‘New Essays’, it is said that the only unity that such an aggregate has is the unity of the idea we form ourselves of an aggregate. Does this show that Leibnizian aggregates are mind-dependent entities? Two popular interpretations answer this question in the positive. According to the *strong phenomenalist interpretation*, aggregates have their being *only* in the mind. According to the *weak phenomenalist interpretation*, aggregates depend for their being *both* on the existence of their constituents *and* on our mind’s perception of certain relations among these constituents. Against these interpretations, it will be argued that aggregates are not mind-dependent entities, but mindindependent pluralities.

In Adams’ most popular version of the *strong phenomenalist interpretation*, Leibnizian bodies are intentional objects that have their being *only* in the mind. This interpretation is less than satisfactory in at least two respects. First, while it is by no means clear that Leibniz preferred an intentional theory of perception to a sense-datum or an adverbial theory, it is even less clear that he should have characterized bodies as ‘entia’, had he thought of them as intentional objects. Second, we know that it is only in his young years that Leibniz regarded bodies as no more real than coherent mental phenomena. From around the mid 1680s onward, Leibniz’s official position became that that bodies *would be* coherent mental phenomena, were it not for the fact that they contain certain indivisible substances or true unities.

In accordance with these considerations, both Rutherford and Lodge have advocated a *weak phenomenalist interpretation*, according to which the being of a Leibnizian aggregate depends *both* on a mental act of aggregation *and* on the being of the things that are aggregated. Several considerations tell against this interpretation. First, even a weak phenomenalist reading stands in prima facie tension with Leibniz’s claim that an aggregate derives its reality *only* from the reality of its constituents. Second, the view that, just by considering certain real-world substances and performing some basic operations, one’s mind can bring into existence a ‘hybrid’, semi-mental entity that has those real-world substances as constituents is no more philosophically unappealing than unLeibnizian in spirit.

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This paper argues and provides textual evidence that, speaking with metaphysical rigour, a Leibnizian aggregate is *nothing other* than all ‘those many things’ that are said to be aggregated (in Leibniz’s Latin: “*ipsae illae res plures*”). An aggregate is not a mereological composite that stands in a whole-part relation with its constituents: when all the Roman emperors are considered together in thought, *no* proper entity comes into existence which has ‘those many things’ as parts, elements or constituents. All that exists are ‘those many things’. As for the role of the mental act of aggregation, it is true that the relational criteria on the basis of which ‘those many things’ are picked out to be aggregated are mind-dependent, being determined by opinion or custom. But the plurality itself is not a mind-dependent entity, nor is *its fulfilling* those criteria a mind-dependent fact.

The non-phenomenalist interpretation advocated here presents several advantages. Besides having more secure conceptual foundations, the view that aggregates are not composites, but mind-independent pluralities finds striking parallels in Cordemoy’s atomism, from which Leibniz famously took inspiration. Leibniz’s own view on matters on composition verges on mereological nihilism and is perfectly consistent with his thesis that unity and being are ‘convertible’: unity and being pertain only to the idea of an aggregate, while, properly speaking, the aggregate (i.e. ‘those many things’) has neither per se unity nor per se being. This view also helps us to make sense of Leibniz’s claim that extension is not the property of a single entity, but the repetition of a certain nature across a plurality of entities. Finally, a non-phenomenalist interpretation is perfectly compatible with saying that many of the attributes classically ascribed to material bodies (e.g. colour, heat, definite shape) are entirely mind-dependent. But it leaves the task of settling the metaphysical status of these attributes to a fully-developed account of Leibniz’s ontology of the mental.