

Monadic Interaction*

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Leibniz has almost universally been represented as denying that created monads, including human minds and the souls of animals, can causally interact either with one another or with bodies.¹ Yet his writings contain many statements which appear to contradict this reading. For example, he maintains in numerous passages that created monads can be said to interact or to cause changes in one another in the special sense of what he calls ‘ideal’ interaction. Thus he writes to Des Bosses that ‘The modifications of one monad are the ideal causes of the modifications of other monads’ (G 2:475/L 608).² And in the *Monadology* he discusses a kind of action which ‘in simple substances is only an *ideal* influence of one monad on the other’ (M 51). Given that such claims appear in the same writings and in writings from the same period in which Leibniz supposedly denies that created monads interact, a puzzle arises concerning how to square these claims with the traditional reading.

Proponents of the traditional reading rarely address this puzzle, but those who do have usually proposed to solve it by denying that what Leibniz calls ideal action is a genuine form of action or causation. As R. C. Sleight (1990b,

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¹ See, for example, Broad 1975, 45; Loeb 1981, 269; Mates 1986, 39, 206, 208; Garber & Wilson 1998, 846; Bennett 2001, 240; Jolley 2006, 95, 116–17. To my knowledge, the only scholar who has challenged this tradition up till now is Hidé Ishiguro. For her take, which I consider problematic, see the articles cited in Woolhouse 1985 as well as Woolhouse’s own discussion.

² Leibniz’s works will be cited using the following abbreviations. A: *Sämtliche Schriften und Briefe*, edited by Deutsche Akademie der Wissenschaften (Darmstadt und Berlin: Akademie-Verlag, 1923–), cited by series, volume, and page number; AG: *G.W. Leibniz: Philosophical Essays*, edited by R. Ariew and D. Garber (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1989); C: *Opusculæ et fragments inédits de Leibniz*, edited by L. Couturat (Paris: Félix Alcan, 1903); DM: *Discourse on Metaphysics*, cited by section number; G: *Die philosophischen Schriften von Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz*, edited by C. I. Gerhardt (Berlin: Weidmannsche Buchhandlung, 1875–90), cited by volume and page number; GM: *Leibnizens Mathematische Schriften*, edited by C. I. Gerhardt (Berlin: A. Asher, 1849–63), cited by volume and page number; H: *Theodicy*, edited by E. M. Huggard (Chicago: Open Court, 1985); L: *Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz: Philosophical Papers and Letters*, 2nd edition, edited by Leroy Loemker (Boston: Kluwer, 1989); LC: *The Labyrinth of the Continuum*, edited by R. A. T. Arthur (New Haven: Yale, 2001); M: *Monadology*, cited by section number; MP: *Leibniz: Philosophical Writings*, edited by G. H. R. Parkinson (London: J.M. Dent, 1973); NE: *New Essays on Human Understanding*, cited by page number from A 6.6; PNG: *Principles of Nature and of Grace*, cited by section number; T: *Essays of Theodicy*, cited by section number; WF: *Leibniz’s “New System” and Associated Contemporary Texts*, edited by R. S. Woolhouse and R. Francks (New York: Oxford, 1997).

MONADIC INTERACTION

162) explains, ‘Much to Leibniz’s credit (in my opinion), when he perceived his philosophical theses to be at odds with common sense and received opinion, he engaged in an effort to “save the appearances”, i.e., to explain how the (mistaken) common sense view related to the underlying metaphysical reality posited by the theory’. In the case of monadic interaction, Sleight continues, the result of this effort was the theory of ideal action, which is ‘an account of merely apparent causation’ that specifies ‘what conditions obtain at the level of ultimate metaphysical reality when causal statements are employed’ (1990b, 161, 163).³ In other words, ideal action is not genuine but merely apparent causation. Thus, when Leibniz claims that monads interact ideally, what he means is just that they *appear* to interact, and since things can certainly appear to interact even if they don’t, such claims in no way conflict with the traditional reading.

As popular and attractive as this traditional perspective may be, I believe that it actually distorts Leibniz’s thought and that a closer look at the relevant texts points in the direction of a rather different approach to monadic interaction. In what follows, I want to argue that Leibniz does not view ideal action as merely apparent interaction but as a non-standard though nonetheless quite genuine form of causal influence. In other words, I shall contend that when Leibniz claims that monads interact ideally, he should be understood to be claiming that they truly do interact, at least in a sense. Further, I shall argue that when Leibniz denies that created monads interact, what he denies, properly speaking, is not that monads interact *tout court*, as the traditional reading has it, but only that they interact in the usual sense, what Leibniz calls ‘real’ or ‘physical’ interaction. Though the contemporary reader may be tempted to suppose that when Leibniz speaks of real influence or real causation, “real” means something like *true* or *genuine*, I aim to show that this is not the case, and that his distinction between real and ideal action is not a distinction between genuine and merely apparent action, but rather a distinction *within* the category of genuine action.

From my point of view the purpose of the theory of ideal action is not, as Sleight suggests, merely to account for appearances, though in a sense (to be specified in §3 below) it does that too. Its purpose is first and foremost to establish a sense in which certain of our ‘ordinary’ judgements come out true: namely, those to the effect that minds interact with one another and with bodies.⁴ As I see it, then, in claiming that monads interact with other things ideally, Leibniz is promoting an approach to monadic interaction which is more moderate (and hence more palatable) than the one he has traditionally been portrayed as taking. Far from making the ‘strange and extravagant’ (Jolley 2006, 95) move of simply denying that created minds interact with other things, he actually believes that such interaction does occur, just not in the way we always thought. Thus, for Leibniz, the theory of ideal action plays the critical

³See also Mates 1986, 206 (cf. 40, 208) and Wilson 1992, 345; cf. Rescher 1991, 179.

⁴Cf. Leibniz to Huygens, 4/14 September 1694: ‘I attempt as much as possible to accommodate common usage, *salva veritate*’ (AG 308/GM 2:199).

MONADIC INTERACTION

role of making it possible for him to achieve something of a rapprochement with our ordinary conception of the world in the face of his denial of all real or physical interaction involving created substances.

My aim in what follows will be to make a case for my alternative to the traditional reading. Before that can be done, however, it will be necessary to have before us at least a rough outline of Leibniz's theory of ideal action. Since that theory has tended to receive short shrift in the literature, I devote the first section of the paper to the task of sketching such an outline. In the second section, I then contrast ideal with real or physical interaction, identifying three key points on which they differ. Drawing on the results of these first two sections, I next present four lines of evidence for thinking that Leibniz considers ideal action to be a kind of genuine and not merely apparent action. In the fourth section, I defend my position against what I take to be the most promising objection which could be raised against it, what I call the *two-approach objection*. In the process, I consider a representative selection of passages which have been (or might be) given in support of the traditional view, and I argue that they can reasonably be interpreted in a way which is consistent with my alternative reading. Having thus completed my case against the traditional reading and in favor of my alternative, in the fifth and final section I explore a complication which threatens to undercut the ability of the theory of ideal action to accomplish what Leibniz claims for it. I conclude that though he consistently represents himself as holding that in a sense created monads truly do interact, serious doubts may be raised about whether he is entitled to such a position given his commitment to a certain picture of the process of divine creation.

1 The Theory of Ideal Action

I should register up front that on my view Leibniz's theory of ideal action appears fully-formed in the mid-1680s, coincident with the emergence of his mature philosophy, and persists essentially unchanged for the rest of his life. For this reason, in the following exposition I will draw freely on texts dating from throughout this roughly thirty-year period, with little regard to exactly when they were written. I will also bracket questions about whether Leibniz changed his views concerning the foundations of his ontology during this period. Some commentators, most notably Daniel Garber, have suggested that during his 'middle years' (roughly, the 1680s and 90s) Leibniz admits the existence of quasi-Aristotelian corporeal substances—composites of substantial form and primary matter—and that only in Leibniz's later years does this view give way to the more familiar ontology of the *Monadology* according to which the only substances are unextended, immaterial simples analogous to the substantial forms of the earlier phase.⁵ Others, though not entirely in agreement

⁵For the classic statement and defense of this view, see Garber 1985. In recent years Garber's position has evolved. For an account of the subsequent changes in his thought, see Garber 2004.

MONADIC INTERACTION

with one another, have opposed various aspects of this reading.⁶ For our purposes, such disputes can safely be ignored. Whatever view we might take on these issues, the fact remains that throughout both the middle and later years Leibniz consistently holds that created substances—whether these be understood as composites of form and matter or as immaterial simples—interact by way of an ideal rather than a real or physical influence. My goal is simply to understand the nature of this ideal influence, and for this we need assume little more about these created substances than that they perceive, and perceive with varying degrees of distinctness. In particular, we need not concern ourselves with whether Leibniz understands them as immaterial monads, composites of matter and form, or still something else.⁷

1.1 Distinctness and Activity

I begin my account with the most familiar component of Leibniz's proposal: his association of activity with distinct representation or perception. Before turning to the texts, I should clarify how Leibniz uses, and therefore how I will be using, the terms "represents", "expresses", "perceives", and their cognates. Two points are salient. First, Leibniz regularly uses "representation" ("represents") and "expression" ("expresses") interchangeably; roughly speaking, both refer to one thing bearing a certain relation of order or correspondence to another.⁸ Second, the term "perception" ("perceiving") has a narrower application: it refers specifically to representation (representing) that occurs in a monad or simple substance. So every perception is a representation, though not all representations are perceptions, since on Leibniz's view such things as bodies and mathematical objects can also represent.⁹

What, then, is the relation between distinctness and activity, as conceived by Leibniz? On some occasions he characterizes it as one of correlation, as here in the *Monadology*:

The creature is said to *act* externally insofar as it has perfection, and *to be acted upon* by another, insofar as it is imperfect. Thus we attribute *action* to the monad insofar as it has distinct perceptions, and *passion* insofar as it has confused perceptions. (M 49)¹⁰

The underlying principle enunciated here is that activity correlates with perfection, and passivity with imperfection. But as Leibniz explicitly indicates elsewhere (and implies here), a monad's perfection consists in its distinct per-

⁶See, e.g., Sleigh 1990a; Adams 1994; Rutherford 1995. For a subtle discussion of the attitudes of these authors toward the ontology of Leibniz's middle years, see Lodge 2005, §5.1.

⁷I will also ignore questions about possible antecedents of the theory of ideal action in other thinkers, except to note that Leibniz appears to have gotten the basic idea from Spinoza. (Cf. Spinoza's discussion of activity at E3p1). For more on the connection with Spinoza, see Kneale 1972.

⁸See G 2:112/L 339; G 1:383–84/WF 53; NE 131, 133; T 357; C 15/MP 176–77.

⁹See, e.g., G 7:263–64/L 207.

¹⁰See also G 7:322/L 365; G 3:465/WF 177; G 3:347/WF 224–25; T 289.

MONADIC INTERACTION

ception, and its imperfection in its confused perception.¹¹ It follows that the degree to which a monad acts increases as its perception becomes more distinct, and decreases as it becomes more confused.

In other texts Leibniz goes farther, maintaining that the activity (passivity) of a monad not only *correlates with* but even *consists in* its distinct (confused) perceptions:

[C]onfused thoughts are a mark of our imperfection, passions, and dependence on the assemblage of exterior things or on matter, whereas the perfection, force, control, liberty, and action of the soul consist principally in our distinct thoughts. (G 4:574/WF 140)

[T]here is in the soul not only an order of distinct perceptions, forming its dominion, but also a series of confused perceptions or passions, forming its bondage (T 64)¹²

This allows us to see why the extent to which a monad acts corresponds to the degree to which its perceptions are distinct: because on Leibniz's view its acting (considered in the monad itself¹³) is nothing other than its having such perceptions.

In order to understand this suggestion better, it would help to know what these distinct perceptions which constitute the activity of a substance take as their objects. In other words, what precisely are they perceptions of? Leibniz answers this question in a comment that he included in 1686 letters to both Arnauld and Foucher:

[E]ach individual substance or complete being is like a world apart, independent of everything other than God. . . . But this independence does not prevent the intercourse of substances with one other, for as all created substances are a continual production of the same sovereign being according to the same designs, and expressing the same universe or the same phenomena, they correspond exactly with each other. And this makes us say that the one acts on the other, because the one expresses more distinctly than the other the cause or reason of the changes [. . .] (G 1:382–83/WF 52; G 2:57/L 337)

The thought expressed in the final sentence of this passage appears to be roughly this. When some created thing undergoes a change, it will be active with respect to that change just in case it represents (or expresses) the reason for that change more distinctly than any other creature. If it does not, then it will be passive and whatever does represent that reason most distinctly will be active. Thus suppose Jones decides to speak to Smith and does. Smith then perceives

¹¹See A 6.4:1620/G 7:312/LC 311/MP 79; PNG 13.

¹²Cf. G 3:636/L 659.

¹³As we shall see below, there is more to a monad's acting ideally than just its perceiving distinctly, insofar as God plays a role too. But considering the active monad only, we can say, as Leibniz does, that its acting consists in its having the distinct perception.

MONADIC INTERACTION

the sounds coming from Jones. Leibniz's thought is that if Jones represents (perceives) the reason for the change she undergoes (that is, her deciding to speak) more distinctly than does Smith (or anyone else), then Jones will be the cause of that change. If however Smith represents (perceives) that reason more distinctly than Jones (and every other created thing), then Smith will be its cause. Analogous remarks apply to the change undergone by Smith.

This preliminary analysis suggests the following first approximation of Leibniz's theory of ideal action:

- (IA1) The *active* thing with respect to some change is the one with the most distinct representation of the reason for that change, whereas the ones which represent that reason less distinctly (i.e., more confusedly) are *passive* with respect to that change.¹⁴

In order to push our understanding of this proposal still further, we must next clarify what is meant by distinct perception, or more generally, distinct representation.

1.2 Distinct Representation

I will not here be attempting anything so ambitious as a general account of distinct representation in Leibniz. One reason for this is that what he means by distinct representation can seem to vary from one context to the next. Since I am interested in the concept only insofar as it figures in his discussions of ideal action, my approach will be to look to these discussions in particular for clues about its content.

The first clue comes from the *Monadology*, where, as we have seen, Leibniz introduces his treatment of monadic interaction with this comment:

¹⁴In some texts Leibniz appears to offer an account of the connection between distinctness and activity which conflicts with (IA1) (see G 2:13/DM 15; G 2:47/AG 76; NE 210). On this account, the activity of a monad consists not in the mere having of a distinct perception, but in an increase in the distinctness of its perception, whereas its passion consists in its perception becoming less distinct or more confused. This account appears to conflict with (IA1) because a monad could evidently perceive the reason for some change distinctly—and therefore be active according to (IA1)—even while its perception is becoming on the whole less distinct. Thus suppose some monad simultaneously performs actions A1, A2, and A3. It then ceases to perform A1 and A2, while continuing to perform A3. According to (IA1), the monad's perception of the reason for A3 must be distinct, but its formerly distinct perceptions of the reasons for A1 and A2 must have become confused. All other things being equal, then, the monad's total perceptual state must have become less distinct. So whereas the monad would be active on (IA1), it would be completely passive according to this alternative account. Such difficulties have led some commentators to conclude that this alternative proposal 'must be regarded as an aberration' (Kneale 1972, 234) or that at some point it must have given way to a different account as Leibniz 'sharpened' his views (Brandom 1981, 160–61). However, I would suggest that when Leibniz talks about increasing and decreasing perceptual distinctness in this context, what he means is just that a monad acts with respect to a given change when its *relevant* perceptions (that is, those pertaining to that change) are becoming more distinct, and is acted upon when its *relevant* perceptions are becoming more confused. If this is in fact what Leibniz had in mind, then there may be no conflict with (IA1). For since (IA1) specifies that acting (externally) involves coming to have a distinct perception of the reason for some change, it stands to reason that when a monad acts, it will realize a net increase in the distinctness of those of its perceptions which are relevant to that change.

MONADIC INTERACTION

49. The creature is said to *act* externally insofar as it has perfection, and *to be acted upon* by another, insofar as it is imperfect. Thus we attribute *action* to the monad insofar as it has distinct perceptions, and *passion* insofar as it has confused perceptions.

In inferring the second claim from the first, he clearly assumes, as he explicitly states elsewhere, that the perfection of a monad consists in its distinct perception. But then in the very next section he has this to say about perfection:

50. And one creature is more perfect than another in that we find in it that which provides an *a priori* reason for that which happens in the other; and this is why we say that it acts on the other.

Taking these remarks together yields the conclusion that the distinct perceptions of a monad are those which provide *a priori* reasons for what happens in others.¹⁵ Thus, bearing in mind what we learned from other texts—namely that these perceptions are supposed to be perceptions of *these reasons*—we can see Leibniz as suggesting more generically that a distinct perception of some thing *x* is a perception with the property of being such as to make (or be apt to make) *x* known.

The essay ‘A Specimen of Discoveries of the Admirable Secrets of a General Nature’, written nearly thirty years earlier, reinforces this point:

[T]hat thing with the more distinct expression is judged to act, and that with the more confused expression is judged to be passive, since to act is a perfection and to be passive is an imperfection. And [*Eaque*] that thing is thought to be a cause from the state of which a reason for changes is most easily given. . . . And causes are not derived from a real influx, but from the providing of a reason. (A 6.4:1620/G 7:312/LC 311/MP 79)

Assuming that whatever acts is a cause, it follows from what Leibniz says here that the thing with the most distinct expression also supplies a reason most readily. He does not exactly say so, but his thought appears to be that representational distinctness just is this property of representing a thing in such a way as to make (or be apt to make) it known.¹⁶

In other texts Leibniz makes an ostensibly similar point, but in terms of intelligible explanations rather than reasons. Here is a representative example:

[Concerning] the true action or passion of a true substance, we can take to be its *action*, which we attribute to itself, the change through

¹⁵Cf. NE 475: ‘The reason is the known truth the connection of which with some lesser known truth makes us give our assent to the latter. But especially and par excellence, we call that a “reason”—even an “a priori reason”—which is the cause not only of our judgement, but also of the truth itself’.

¹⁶A closer look at this passage in context suggests that Leibniz actually means to distinguish between causation, which occurs when one body influences another, and activity, which involves substances. This makes no difference for the point I am making, however, for as we shall see below he believes that causes in this sense are relevantly analogous to active substances.

MONADIC INTERACTION

which it tends toward its perfection; and likewise we can take to be its *passion* and attribute to an outside cause the change through which the contrary happens to it, [...] because in the first case the substance itself and in the second the outer things serve to explain the change in an intelligible way. (NE 211)¹⁷

According to this remark the actor with respect to some change is that thing which affords an intelligible explanation of the change; further, if something undergoes a change for which it supplies no adequate explanation, then it can be said to have been acted upon by whatever thing does provide such an explanation. Given what Leibniz says elsewhere about the connection between activity and distinctness, then, his thought appears to be that a distinct perception of the reason for some change is one which imparts to us an understanding of why that change took place. In other words, it makes known the very reason which is its object. This passage and others like it therefore serve to reinforce the conclusion drawn from the *Monadology*.

Leibniz likes to illustrate his idea that the actor provides the intelligible explanation by comparing it with what happens, on his view, in cases of body-body interaction. Though he discerns nothing unintelligible in the idea of one body exerting a real or physical influence on another, and sometimes even grants that such interaction occurs,¹⁸ he still believes that by itself experience provides an insufficient basis for determining which body is the cause and which the effect. This is because with any physical event we confront an 'equivalence of hypotheses' in that what happens can be explained by arbitrarily many empirically adequate suppositions about the motions of the bodies involved. Leibniz's favorite example is that of a ship moving through water. We may find it natural to suppose that in such a case the ship propels itself and causes the water around it to swirl. According to Leibniz, however, it would be equally consistent with all available empirical evidence to suppose that the water causes the boat to move, or that the boat and the water are both partial causes of the various motions. Experience alone does not single out the correct hypothesis, and so in order to discover the true cause, Leibniz suggests, we must look beyond experience and ask which hypothesis provides us with the most intelligible explanation of what happens:

[W]e attribute action to that substance with the more distinct expression, and we call it the cause, just as when a body floats in water there are an infinity of movements of the parts of water, which make it the case that the place the body vacates is always filled up in the shortest way. This is why we say that this body is the cause of the motion, because by its means we can explain distinctly what happens. But if we examine what is physical and real in the motion, we can very well suppose that the body is in repose and that all the rest is in motion in accordance with this hypothesis, since every motion in itself is only a relative thing, that is to say, is a change

¹⁷See also G 4:486/WF 20; NE 195; AG 279.

¹⁸See G 6:570/WF 199; NE 60; G 3:505; G 7:398/AG 336/L 702.

MONADIC INTERACTION

of position which cannot be assigned to any one thing with mathematical precision; but we attribute it to a body in such a way as to explain everything most distinctly. (G 2:69)

I take it that by distinct explanation Leibniz means nothing other than intelligible explanation. Hence, when he claims at the end that we attribute action to a body ‘in such a way as to explain everything most distinctly’, his point is just that we favor that hypothesis which explains everything most intelligibly (that is, which confers the most understanding upon one who grasps it). But notice that he also says we consider a given body the cause because ‘by its means we can explain distinctly what happens’. Apparently, then, the body which is active according to the most intelligible hypothesis will be the one by appeal to which we can explain the changes in the most intelligible way. As he points out in this text and several others, the cause in a case of body-body interaction is in this respect much like the actor in a case of interaction involving a monad.¹⁹

All of these texts from Leibniz’s discussions of monadic interaction point to the same conclusion: to represent something distinctly is to represent it in such a way as to make it knowable by us.²⁰ We can therefore clarify Leibniz’s proposal by supplanting (IA1) with this:

- (IA2) The *active* thing with respect to some change is the one which provides the intelligible explanation for that change, and the thing which undergoes some change for which it does not provide an intelligible explanation is *passive* with respect to that change.

1.3 Divine Accommodation

Some commentators write as if Leibniz’s theory of ideal interaction amounts to nothing more than some thesis in the vicinity of (IA2), that is, some thesis

¹⁹See A 6.4:1620/G 7:312/LC 311/MP 79; G 2:57/L 337; G 1:382–83/WF 52; G 4:486–87/WF 20.

²⁰Evidence for this account can also be found in other contexts. For example, at T 356 Leibniz claims that confused or imperfect representations suppress something in the sense that they represent ‘more than we see there’, just as our ideas of sensible qualities represent various minute motions which we cannot notice because of their multiplicity and smallness. We sense these qualities, he says, but we are unaware of the small perceptions of motions that compose these sensations, and thus we cannot represent the qualities distinctly. To represent them distinctly would be to represent them in such a way that we could discern their contents or natures—in effect, to represent them as they truly are, as complexes of tiny corporeal shapes and motions. And this is beyond us. According to this passage, then, to represent something such as a reason distinctly would be to represent it in such a way as to make (or be apt to make) that reason—or, what is the same, its content—known to us. This account of distinct representation may helpfully be contrasted with that of Robert Brandom, who construes more distinct representation as representation which is ‘richer and more specific in content’ (1981, 162). On my view, the distinctness of a representation is a function not of the richness or specificity of its content, but of the accessibility of that content to us. As I see it, part of Leibniz’s point in the passage just discussed is that a confused representation can have a very rich and specific, but inaccessible, content. He offers the example of ideas of sensible qualities, which ‘represent only the small movements carried out in the organs’. As many such movements are represented, these ideas have a rather rich and specific content. Yet they represent only confusedly. Confusion therefore does not consist in a penurious or inspecific content; it consists rather in there being in the representation ‘more than we see there’.

MONADIC INTERACTION

linking activity with distinct representation.²¹ However, I believe that (IA2) gives us only half the story. Note that (IA2) is not even properly speaking a theory of *action*. It does tell us that substances act by supplying explanations, but it does nothing to explain on an intuitive level how providing an explanation amounts to a kind of activity. (As Loeb (ibid) correctly notes, expressive relations are non-causal.) For that, we need something more.

Leibniz appears to have appreciated this point, for in most of his presentations of the theory he does provide us with that something more. It is what may be called the thesis of *divine accommodation*: roughly, that those substances which represent reasons distinctly moved God in the beginning to adapt other substances to them in order to achieve harmony, so that the former substances can be said to have influenced the latter ones in a roundabout fashion. Here is how he explains the idea in the *Theodicy*:

We can nonetheless give a true and philosophical sense to this *mutual dependence* that we conceive between soul and body. It is that one of these substances depends on the other ideally, insofar as the reason for what happens in the one can be conveyed by that which is in the other—something which had already taken place in the decrees of God, as God ordered in advance the harmony that there would be between them. This automaton, which would perform the servant's function, would depend upon me ideally, in virtue of the knowledge of him who, foreseeing my future orders, would have rendered it capable of serving me at the appointed time in the future. The knowledge of my future volitions would have moved [*mû*] this great artisan, who would have formed the automaton accordingly: my influence would be objective, and his physical. For insofar as the soul has perfection and distinct thoughts, God has accommodated the body to the soul and has arranged things in advance so that the body is driven to execute its orders; and insofar as the soul is imperfect and its perceptions are confused, God has accommodated the soul to the body, so that the soul lets itself be inclined by the passions which arise from corporeal representations. This produces the same effect and the same appearance as if the one depended on the other immediately and by means of a physical influence. (T 66)

A few lines later, he adds that substances influence one another in like fashion:

²¹For instance, Rescher maintains that 'In the system of Leibniz, causality is definable strictly in terms of monadic perception It is solely in terms of clearness of perception that efficient causation, itself a phenomenon rather than a monadic reality, comes to be well-founded in the monadic realm' (1986, 79–80). In the same vein, Loeb claims that in putting forward the theory that 'one substance "acts" upon another if it expresses the other more clearly than the other expresses it, where "expression" is a noncausal relation of representation or correlation', Leibniz aims to 'explicate the sense in which one substance "acts" upon another entirely in terms of noncausal relations between those substances' (1981, 271). (Note that both Rescher and Loeb represent Leibniz as explicating activity in terms of the possession of clear perception, whereas Leibniz himself emphasizes that activity requires not just clear but distinct perception.)

MONADIC INTERACTION

And the same thing must apply to all that we conceive of the actions of simple substances on one another. It is that each is assumed to act on the other in proportion to its perfection, although this be only ideally and in the reasons of things, as God in the beginning ordered one substance to another, according to the perfection or imperfection that there is in each (ibid)

Leibniz says much in these passages, but four points in particular should be noted. First, he emphasizes that in the beginning God *ordered* or *accommodated* souls to one another, souls to bodies, and bodies to souls. Second, he describes this process of accommodation as one in which ‘God has ordered in advance the harmony that there would be between them’. So apparently the point of accommodating these things to one another is to bring them into harmony. Third, Leibniz explains that for any soul x and body y , God adapts x to y to the extent that x has confused representations, and y to x to the extent that x has distinct representations. Likewise, bearing in mind that the perfection of a monad is its distinct perception, and the imperfection its confused perception, he in effect indicates that for any souls x and y , God adapts x to y to the extent that y has distinct perceptions and x has confused perceptions. These are actually rather rough formulations of the points Leibniz presumably wants to make. In view of what has come before, I would suggest that we can put them somewhat more precisely, though still roughly, as follows:

For any soul x , body y , and change z , God adapts x to y with respect to z just in case y represents the reason for z distinctly and x represents the reason for z confusedly.

For any souls x , y and change z , God adapts x to y with respect to z just in case y perceives the reason for z distinctly and x perceives the reason for z confusedly.

Though Leibniz does not say as much, I believe his thought is that things are adapted in this particular way rather than another because God wants to preserve the perfections of creatures as much as possible. If a soul or body represents a reason distinctly, that is a kind of perfection and so God is not going to adapt it to others, thus eliminating that perfection; rather, God is going to adapt others to it.²² Fourth, Leibniz says that in all this the active creature’s influence is objective, and God’s physical. Clearly, God influences through adapting things to one another. But in what way does the active creature influence others? Leibniz does not say exactly, but he does mention that ideal action occurs ‘in the reasons of things’. His thought may therefore be that the active creature acts through giving God a reason to make changes in other things. If

²²Note that if a substance’s having a distinct perception is the reason why God accommodates other things to it, then it is also the reason why those things have certain modifications. This is why Leibniz often says that the active thing provides the reason not only for its own change but for the changes of others. The active substance explains why the passive thing accords with it, by explaining why God accommodates the passive thing to it. As Leibniz himself notes at DM 32, we often omit this intermediate step in practice.

MONADIC INTERACTION

so, then the 'objective' influence of the creature would consist in its rationally determining God to order things one way rather than another.

This last suggestion receives confirmation elsewhere. We have already encountered in the *Monadology* the claim that a monad acts insofar as it has distinct perceptions (§49) and insofar as 'we find within it that which provides an *a priori* reason for what happens in the other' (§50). To this Leibniz immediately adds:

51. But in simple substances this is only an *ideal* influence of one monad on the other, which can have its effect only through the intervention of God, insofar as in the ideas of God a monad demands with reason [*demande avec raison*] that God, in ordering the others from the beginning of things, have regard for it. For since a created monad cannot have a physical influence on the interior of another, it is only by this means that the one can have any dependence on the other.

52. And it is by this that actions and passions among creatures are mutual. For God, comparing two simple substances, finds in each reasons that oblige him to accommodate [*l'obligent à y accommoder*] the other to it, and consequently what is active in some respects is passive according to another point of consideration: *active* insofar as what is known distinctly in it provides us with the reason for what happens in another, and *passive* insofar as the reason for what happens in it is found in what is known distinctly in another.

Here we read that the active monad 'demands with reason' that God have regard for it, and that God finds within monads 'reasons that oblige him to accommodate' them to one another. In a letter to Des Bosses, Leibniz puts the point this way: 'The modifications of one monad are the ideal causes of the modifications of other monads [...] insofar as there appear in one monad reasons which moved God from the beginning of things to establish modifications in another monad [*quae Deum ad modificationes in alia Monade constituendas ab initio rerum moverunt*]' (G 2:475/L 608). Leibniz evidently means to suggest that the active substance moves or influences God through a kind of rational demand or determination, that is, through giving the divine being a reason to order other creatures a certain way.²³ God then in turn (physically) influences

²³The idea that substances act by rationally demanding and determining also features prominently in Sukjae Lee's (2004) account of the monad's internal action, that is, its progression from one state or perception to the next. According to Lee, God conserves a creature by (re)creating it in accordance with its prior state, that state being the cause of the subsequent one by virtue of rationally determining God to (re)create the monad, in the next moment, in that latter state. This intriguing proposal deserves more attention than I can pay it here, but let me at least indicate why I consider it unsatisfactory. In view of the foregoing analysis, it should be clear that the internal action of monads, as Lee understands it, amounts to something like ideal action. However, Leibniz himself seems to conceive the internal action of a monad as real or physical (and therefore immediate) action. For instance, he claims that 'Souls exercise a physical and immediate action in themselves, for they are always immediate causes, and often masters of their natural actions' (G 6:570/WF 199; see also G 1:391/WF 54; T 400). Hence, though I agree with Lee that created

MONADIC INTERACTION

those creatures in accordance with this determination, so that in this way the active substance can truly be said to influence other created substances, though only 'through the intervention of God'. Elsewhere Leibniz characterizes this indirect influence of the created monad as a kind of 'spiritual and moral motion' (G 6:421–22/H 427) and as an influx that is moral rather than physical (AG 279).²⁴

Leibniz advances the thesis of divine accommodation in many other texts.²⁵ I shall not discuss them here, however, since the point I want to make should already be clear: this thesis plays a critical role in the theory of ideal action. Divine accommodation is, as it were, where the action is. The idea expressed in (IA2), in essence that active things explain and passive things do not, does not reveal the connection between explaining (or representing reasons distinctly) and acting. For that, we need the thesis of divine accommodation, according to which a thing's explanatory power, a kind of perfection, moves God to bring other things into harmony with it in order to preserve that perfection. A fuller statement of Leibniz's proposal would therefore look something like this:

- (IA3) The actor *A* with respect to some change acts on or influences other things by rationally determining God to adapt those things to it from the beginning in order to bring them into harmony; *A* determines God in this way in virtue of its providing an intelligible explanation (that is, a distinct representation of the reason) for the change.²⁶

substances act by rationally determining God, I believe he errs in representing this action as the internal (or immanent) rather than the external (or transeunt) action of substances.

²⁴See also G 6:423–24/H 428–29.

²⁵See DM 15, 32; G 2:71; G 4:486/WF 20; G 4:510/L 503; G 4:558/WF 111; G 3:465/WF 177; G 6:570/WF 199; NE 177; G 3:403/AG 195; AG 202–3, 279; L 608.

²⁶One feature of (IA3) requires further defense. I claim that on Leibniz's view God gives priority to certain perceptions over others because they are more distinct and intelligible, thus contributing more to the perfection of the world. This makes the distinctness of a perception in a sense prior to, and explanatory of, God's decision to favor it over others. But this is not the only way Leibniz has been read. According to Wilson (1992, 343–45), he believes that one perception's being more distinct than another consists in its enjoying rational priority over the other in the mind of God. This position clearly implies that my (IA3) misrepresents Leibniz, since a perception's being distinct cannot explain why it enjoys God's favor if God's favoring it explains its being distinct. However, my reading should be preferred to Wilson's for two reasons. First, as I have already shown, there is no need to appeal to rational priority in the mind of God in order to explicate the notion of distinct perception. An abundance of evidence points to the conclusion that to perceive something distinctly is to perceive it in such a way as to make (or be apt to make) that thing known, and this evidence is much stronger than any we have for Wilson's alternative. Second, that alternative appears to entail egregious violations of the principle of sufficient reason, or more specifically, of Leibniz's doctrine that God never does anything without a reason. In view of this doctrine, if God gives priority to one perception over another, there must be some reason for this. But what could this reason be? The most natural thought is the one I have urged: that God gives priority to certain perceptions because they are distinct and therefore more perfect. But Wilson commits herself to rejecting this thought, since she wants to explicate perceptual distinctness in terms of rational priority in the mind of God. No further possibilities suggest themselves. So her view appears to introduce into Leibniz's system precisely the sort of unintelligibility he so detested, and that he criticized Locke and Bayle, among others, for tolerating (see, e.g., NE 56, 131, 165–66, 381–82, 403–4; T 340). Given that my view provides a ready answer to the question why God favors some perceptions over others, this difficulty would seem to tell decisively against Wilson's proposal and in favor of mine.

I will in fact take this to be the complete and final version of the theory of ideal action.

2 Real versus Ideal Action

Now that we have a reasonably clear picture of how ideal action is supposed to work, I can clarify how ideal activity differs from that which Leibniz calls real or physical. Three points are salient.

First, whereas ideal action involves influencing something only *indirectly*, through the mediation of God, real action involves a *direct* influence. The dependence arising from ideal influence, Leibniz explains in the *New Essays*, ‘is only a metaphysical one, which consists in God’s taking account of one of them in regulating the other, or taking more account of one than the other according to the inherent perfections of each’. In contrast, ‘physical dependence would consist in an immediate influence which the dependent one would receive from the other’ (NE 177). A similar suggestion can be found in the *Discourse*, where Leibniz writes that in the ‘language of metaphysics’, ‘to act is to determine immediately’ (DM 32). It would be reasonable to assume that speaking in accordance with the language of metaphysics is equivalent to speaking ‘in metaphysical rigor’, as he often puts it. But in a letter to Arnauld (to be discussed below) Leibniz claims that action in the metaphysically rigorous sense is *real* action (G 2:133). So his thought in the *Discourse* appears to be that action which is real is by definition immediate determination.²⁷

Second, real action involves efficient causation, whereas ideal action consists primarily in final causation.²⁸ Bearing in mind that in the relevant contexts Leibniz uses “physical” and “real” interchangeably, we can see him pointing up this very contrast in passages such as these:

Thus we can say that in the intention of God and in the order of final causes, one substance depends on another, God having had regard for the one in producing the other, although according to physical influence, or in the order of efficient causes, the one has as little dependence on the other as if it were alone in the world with God. (G 4:578/WF 153)

Objects do not act upon intelligent substances as efficient and physical causes, but as final and moral causes. (G 6:422/H 427; cf. G 2:69)

At NE 475, Leibniz remarks that ‘the *cause* in things corresponds to the *reason* in truths. This is why the cause itself is often called a reason, and particularly the final cause’. And he writes to Molanus that ‘the reasons for what was

²⁷For additional evidence of the direct/indirect contrast, see DM 14; G 6:570/WF199; NE 211; T 66.

²⁸In a draft letter to Arnauld composed in late 1686, Leibniz toys with the thought that ideal actors are better viewed as exemplar rather than final causes (G 2:69, 71). As far as I can tell, however, he never takes up this suggestion elsewhere.

MONADIC INTERACTION

created by understanding are the final causes or plans of the one who made them' (G 4:299/AG 242). Such comments suggest that Leibniz would consider ideal actors to be final causes because they provide *reasons* why other things are thus and so. They rationally determine God to accommodate other creatures to them, and consequently God effects changes to the modifications of those creatures through efficient causation. Ideal actors therefore explain why other creatures accord with them, and in this sense they are final causes of the states of others.

Third, ideal action takes place 'in the ideal region of the possibles, that is, in the divine understanding' (T 335); real action does not. To speak precisely, Leibniz's view is not that one (created) *substance* rationally determines God to make certain changes to others, though he often expresses himself this way; rather, his claim is that the *idea* of the substance, something which exists in the mind of God prior to creation, determines him to make adjustments to—evidently—other such ideas. Leibniz emphasizes this point himself: 'each thing *as an idea* has contributed, before its existence, to the resolution that has been made upon the existence of all things' (T 9; cf. M 51). Thus, ideal action is something which takes place in the mind of God prior to the decision to create; it concerns possibles rather than actuals. In fact, when Leibniz writes in a discussion of his doctrine of 'striving possibles' that the struggle between them 'can be only ideal, that is to say, can only be a conflict of reasons in the most perfect understanding' (T 201), he implies that "ideal" by definition refers, aptly enough, to things which happen in the mind of God. In contrast, all indications point to real action being something which takes place outside the mind of God and which involves not possibles but actuals—either God or things which have been created and thus made actual.

Compare this with Leibniz's use of "real" and "ideal" in discussions of the 'labyrinth of the continuum'. Without going into details, we may note that his strategy for escaping this labyrinth involves distinguishing between the disjoint realms of the real and the ideal. The difference, he explains, is that whereas real things are actual beings such as substances and bodies, ideal things, such as space, time, and geometrical figures, pertain 'to possibles and to actual things considered as possible'.²⁹ Space, for instance, which Leibniz describes as a 'mental thing',³⁰ 'is not something substantial, but ideal, and consists in possibilities or an order of coexistents which is in some way possible'.³¹ Likewise, geometrical figures concern possibilities: 'From the fact that a mathematical body cannot be resolved into first constituents we can, at any rate, infer that it isn't real, but something mental, indicating only the possibility of parts, not anything actual'.³² Since on Leibniz's view possibles reside in the region of God's ideas,³³ we can conclude that ideal entities belong to that realm as well. In contrast, real things such as bodies and monads are actual

²⁹G 2:282/AG 185/L 539.

³⁰G 2:268/AG 178/L 536.

³¹G 2:278–79. See also G 2:379; G 7:363/AG 324–25; G 4:568/WF 122–23; GM 7:242.

³²G 2:268/AG 178/L 535–36.

³³See A 6.4:1618/G 7:311/LC 307/MP 77; T 184, 189, 335; M 44.

MONADIC INTERACTION

rather than merely possible, and as such exist outside the mind of God.³⁴ So in his discussions of both activity and the composition of the continuum, Leibniz appears to use “real” and “ideal” in roughly the same way, the former referring to things or processes which are actual, the latter to those which are or concern possibles, and thus exist or occur in the mind of God.

Combining the three foregoing points, we can say that if one actual being directly influences another by way of efficient causation, then the action is real (or physical); but if a being indirectly influences another in virtue of its idea in the mind of God having been a final cause of the adjustments God makes to other ideas, the action is only ideal. From this we can see that when Leibniz speaks of real action, influence, or causation, “real” does not mean, as we may be tempted to suppose, *genuine* or *true*. We admittedly use the word that way often in everyday speech, as when we say things like ‘Overpopulation poses no real threat’ or ‘Will the real Elvis please stand up?’ This may explain why commentators have tended to assume that for Leibniz, all genuine action is real, an assumption which has led them to (mis)take his rejection of all real monadic interaction for a rejection of monadic interaction *tout court*. But it should now be clear that for Leibniz “real” does not carry this sense at all. In his idiolect, rather, “real” means something like *pertaining to that which is actual*, a fact in view of which we should no longer find it tempting to make this assumption.

3 Why Ideal Action is Truly Action

Having sketched the outlines of Leibniz’s theory of ideal action and clarified the difference between ideal and real action, I can now present my arguments against the traditional reading of Leibniz and in favor of my alternative. Recall that on the traditional view, Leibniz simply denies that created monads ever causally interact with other created things; and further, when he speaks of monads acting ideally he has in mind a merely apparent interaction which serves to explain why they appear to interact when in fact they don’t. In the next section, I will take a closer look at Leibniz’s alleged denials of monadic interaction and argue that they have been widely misunderstood. But first, I want to argue that the traditional reading also goes wrong insofar as it represents ideal action not as genuine but as merely apparent action.

It is true that in the *Theodicy* Leibniz writes that the ideal interaction between soul and body ‘produces the same effect and the same appearance as if the one depended on the other immediately and by means of a physical influence’ (T 66).³⁵ Notice, however, that what he purports to save is not just any appearance of influence, but the appearance of an *immediate* and *physical* influence. His point appears to be that substances appear to interact by way of this sort of influence precisely because they interact ideally. So in a sense the

³⁴See, e.g., G 4:491–92/AG 146–47/WF 45–46; G 2:268/AG 178–79/L 535–36; G 2:282–83/AG 185–86/L 539; G 2:379; G 7:562.

³⁵Cf. G 6:568/WF 197.

MONADIC INTERACTION

monad's acting ideally does explain why it appears to exert an immediate and physical influence. It by no means follows, though, that ideal action is merely apparent action. For Leibniz's point may be that the appearance of a direct and physical influence between soul and body arises from the fact that they exert an indirect and non-physical (though nonetheless genuine) causal influence on one another. This text therefore provides no support for the traditional supposition that ideal activity is merely apparent activity. Moreover, no other texts can be found in the Leibnizian corpus in which he so much as characterizes ideal activity that way.³⁶ In contrast, no fewer than four lines of evidence point to the conclusion that Leibniz regards ideal action as a genuine form of causal activity.

First, Leibniz indicates in a number of texts that the theory of ideal action specifies a sense in which it is *true* to say that created minds interact with one another and with bodies. Consider that after arguing in §14 of the *Discourse on Metaphysics* that substances correspond 'without acting on one another immediately', he concludes the section by noting that 'since we attribute to other things as to causes acting on us what we perceive in a certain way, we must consider the foundation for this judgement and the element of truth there is in it'. He then proceeds to outline a version of the theory of ideal action in §15. Much later in the work, harking back to this outline, he purports to have 'already noted how one can truly say that particular substances act on one another' (DM 27). Leibniz reinforces this point in subsequent writings. In his 'Clarification of the New System', for instance, he explains:

I do not even shy away from saying that the soul *moves* the body, and as a Copernican speaks truly of the rising of the sun, a Platonist of the reality of matter, a Cartesian the reality of sensible qualities, provided that we understand them soundly, I believe likewise that it is quite true to say that substances act on one another, provided that we understand that the one is the cause of changes in the other in consequence of the laws of harmony. (G 4:495/WF 49)³⁷

Likewise, he claims in the *Theodicy*, some fourteen years later, that the theory of ideal action allows him to 'give a true and philosophical sense to this *mutual*

³⁶In a published reply to Bayle's *Historical and Critical Dictionary*, Leibniz does write that there is 'constraint in substances only externally and in appearances' (G 4:558/WF 111). This might be taken as evidence for the thought that ideal action involves a merely apparent influence. However, we can plausibly suppose that in this remark Leibniz means to deny only that there is a real or physical constraint in substances, except in appearances. Cf. T 66.

³⁷Leibniz offers no guidance, at least in this context, concerning the sound interpretation of the claims of the Copernican, the Platonist, and the Cartesian. He does, however, tell us that when he speaks of substances interacting, we should understand him to be claiming that one substance causes changes in another 'in consequence of the laws of harmony'. Leibniz's meaning is obscure, but what he has in mind, I believe, is nothing other than the thought that God accommodates one substance to another in order to harmonize them, that is, to bring them into accord with the 'laws of harmony'. As I see it, therefore, Leibniz is alluding here to the theory of ideal action. His point is that on a sound understanding of his talk of substantial interaction, he is claiming that one substance acts on another not directly and by way of efficient causation, but ideally, through the mediation of God and in accordance with the 'laws of harmony'.

MONADIC INTERACTION

dependence that we conceive between the soul and the body' (T 66).³⁸ Such passages reveal that from Leibniz's point of view, the account of ideal action provides a sense in which monads can truly be said to interact.³⁹ But notice that it could not perform this function if ideal action were not a genuine form of action. If it were action in appearance only, then even if monads did 'act' in this sense, it would still be false to say that they act (externally), and so the theory would fail to accomplish what Leibniz claims for it. Assuming that he realizes this, we can therefore conclude that on his view ideal actors truly act. But then Leibniz must also believe that monads truly interact, since he affirms that they interact ideally.

Second, in his discussions of ideal activity Leibniz often straightforwardly affirms that monads interact with or depend upon one another. For instance, after writing to Arnauld that 'each individual substance or complete being is like a world apart, independent of every other thing but God', Leibniz hastens to add that

this independence does not prevent the intercourse [*commerce*] of substances with one other, for as all created substances are a continual production of the same sovereign being according to the same designs, and expressing the same universe or the same phenomena, they correspond exactly with each other. And this makes us say that the one acts on the other, because the one expresses more distinctly than the other the cause or reason of the changes [...]. It is thus, in my opinion, that the intercourse [*commerce*] between created substances must be understood, and not as a real physical influence or dependence, which we could never conceive distinctly. (G 2:57/L 337)

Likewise, in his 1698 essay 'On Nature Itself', Leibniz remarks that

What we can establish about the *transeunt actions of creatures* may better be explained elsewhere; in fact, I have already partly explained it: the *intercourse* [*commercium*] of *substances* or of monads arises not by influx but by a consensus originating in their preformation by God, so that each one is accommodated to external things [*ad extranea accommodato*] while it follows the internal force and laws of its own nature [...]. (L 503/G 4:510)

Texts such as these certainly do not give the impression that Leibniz is trying to explain why monads which do not interact give the appearance that they do. To the contrary, they give the impression that he is trying to explain the sense in which monads do interact if not by way of a physical influx or dependence.⁴⁰

³⁸Cf. G 2:47/AG 76; NE 74; T 290.

³⁹This is how the account allows him to preserve ordinary ways of speaking about the activity and passivity of substances, a feature Leibniz touts as one of the advantages of his new system (see G 4:486/AG 145/L 459/WF 20).

⁴⁰See also G 6:570/WF 199; G 6:421–22/H 427.

MONADIC INTERACTION

Third, we have seen (in §1 above) that Leibniz's descriptions of how ideal action supposedly works suggest that it is a genuine, if non-standard, sort of action in which a substance *moves* God to accommodate other substances to it, thereby (indirectly) influencing those other substances. On this score Leibniz's language is very suggestive. As we have seen, he claims that monads 'demand with reason' that God accommodate other monads to them in certain respects (M 51), and that within monads there are reasons which 'moved God from the beginning of things to establish modifications in another monad' (G 2:475/L 608), or which 'oblige him to accommodate' substances to one another (M 52). Had Leibniz conceived of ideal action as merely apparent action, then it is hard to see why he would describe his view in such terms. For they suggest that on his view the active monad exerts a genuine influence of sorts on God, who in turn influences other monads by ordering or accommodating them to the active one, thus bringing it about that the active monad exerts a genuine or 'objective' (though indirect) influence on the others.⁴¹

Fourth, we have also seen that Leibniz classifies ideal action as a special case of final causation. This is significant because unlike many of his fellow early moderns, Leibniz does not dismiss final causes as spurious. Rather, all indications are that he accepts final causation as a genuine form of causation.⁴² For instance, he characterizes God as 'the common final and efficient cause of things' (AG 319/G 7:344), and he believes we should be attached to God 'not only as to the architect and efficient cause of our being, but also as to our master and final cause' (M 90).⁴³ In §19 of the *Discourse*, Leibniz indicates that if we eliminated final causes altogether, it would be 'as if God proposed no end or good in acting or as if the good were not the object of his will'. But he also repeatedly insists (e.g., in the *Theodicy*) that the good *is* the object of God's will and that God *does* act for an end. Further, Leibniz maintains that in order for nature to be explained well, physics must treat not only efficient but final causes; ignoring the final causes, he says, would leave much about nature unexplained, 'just as a house would be badly explained if we were to describe only the arrangement of its parts, but not its use' (AG 254–55/G 4:398).⁴⁴ Finally, Leibniz emphasizes that just as things take place through efficient causality in the material realm, so within the monad things take place through final causality, as appetites drive it from one perception to the next.⁴⁵ In view of all this, Leibniz's characterizations of ideal action as a kind of final causation would seem to entail that monads which interact ideally do not merely appear to interact, but truly do interact.

So much for my four lines of evidence. Though considered individually

⁴¹One might object to Leibniz's position by noting that 'all creatures have their entire being from God, and so they can neither act on him nor determine him'. For Leibniz's reply, see G 6:423/H 428.

⁴²It has even been argued that Leibniz's final causes are a species of efficient causality. See Carlin 2006.

⁴³Cf. AG 126–27/L 442; G 7:305/AG 152/L 489.

⁴⁴Cf. DM 19, 22; PNG 3, 11.

⁴⁵See, for example, T 62, 74; M 36, 79; G 7:344/AG 319; G 7:412/L 712; G 7:419/L 716–17.

perhaps none of them would suffice to overturn the traditional reading, collectively they make a powerful case for understanding the ideal action of monads as a genuine causal influence. They suggest that Leibniz, far from taking the radical line according to which finite minds never causally influence other created things, actually believes that such minds do in a way interact with one another and with bodies.⁴⁶

In saying this, of course, I do not mean to suggest that the ideal influence these created substances exert stands on a par with real influence. To the contrary, Leibniz may well regard ideal activity as a metaphysically thinner, less robust form of causation than real activity, examples of which include God's creation and conservation of the world and the created monad's production of its states. My point is simply that on Leibniz's view, the ideal influence of created substances is, even if something less than real or physical influence, nothing less than a genuine causal influence.

4 The Two-Approach Objection

Perhaps the most promising strategy for resisting this argument against the traditional reading would be to interpret Leibniz along lines suggested by Nicholas Jolley. Though he belongs squarely to the traditional camp, he takes a more nuanced stance than most on this issue. He grants that in some contexts, namely those pertaining to ideal action, Leibniz promotes a kind of reductionist approach on which interaction is not eliminated but reduced (to ideal interaction). To his credit, Jolley even acknowledges that in such contexts Leibniz 'sometimes suggests that our ordinary statements about causal interaction can be understood in a way that they come out true' (1998, 595). Thus, Jolley would presumably allow that insofar as Leibniz commits to this reductionist approach, the traditional view is wrong. But Jolley would hasten to add that this poses no insuperable challenge to the traditional view, because as it happens reduction is not Leibniz's preferred approach to interaction. His 'more typical' and even 'dominant' approach is rather one which favors elimination over reduction: it is the 'better known' eliminativist approach imputed to him by the

⁴⁶This view of ideal action also allows us to understand the sense in which, on Leibniz's view, Aristotle's slogan that 'nothing is in our understanding which does not come from the senses' is correct, even though in metaphysical rigor all ideas are innate. As Leibniz explains in §27 of the Discourse, such 'doxologies' or 'practico-logies' not only can be acceptable in ordinary usage, but can even be given 'a sense according to which they have nothing false in them, just as I have already noted [in §15] how one can truly say that particular substances act on one another' (DM 27; cf. NE 74). He then adds this important remark: 'And in this same sense we can also say that we receive knowledge from the outside by the ministry of the senses, because some external things contain or express more particularly the reasons that determine our soul to certain thoughts'. Evidently he means to suggest that ideas can be said to have an external source in the same sense in which, as he explains earlier in the work (§15), substances can be said to interact, that is, in the ideal sense. More precisely, assuming that to express reasons 'more particularly' is to express them more distinctly, his suggestion appears to be that because certain thoughts are caused ideally by external things, we can justifiably say that the ideas which enter into those thoughts have an external origin. For more on this see Puryear 2008.

MONADIC INTERACTION

traditional view (ibid). Hence, Jolley would say that even though it conflicts with the reductive approach Leibniz sometimes advocates, in the final analysis the traditional reading should be considered fundamentally correct. Clearly if this interpretation were tenable, then my argument against the traditional view and in favor of my alternative would ultimately fail. For defenders of the traditional perspective, following Jolley, could simply grant that Leibniz sometimes thinks monads interact ideally, and that his thinking this implies that he believes monads truly do interact, without needing to relinquish their belief that on Leibniz's considered view monads never interact. Call this the *two-approach objection*.

As it happens, the interpretation on which this objection turns is untenable. Its most notable defect is that it requires us to make the rather unlikely supposition that Leibniz vacillated between these conflicting approaches not just over the last thirty years of his life, but at the same general time and even in the same writings. Understood as Jolley describes them, the approaches are manifestly incompatible; and Leibniz would have no doubt realized this: he would not have confused them. So if he does in fact promote both, we would have to suppose that he often switches abruptly and without warning from the one to the other.⁴⁷ For instance, we would have to say that in §14 of *Discourse*, at least up to the end, he advocates the eliminative approach, whereas in §§15 and 27 he favors the reductive approach. And we would have to suppose that similar switches occur in the correspondence with Arnauld (1686–87), the 'New System of the Nature and Communication of Substances' (1695), the *Theodicy* (1710), the *Monadology* (1714), and elsewhere. In brief, we would have to maintain that over the course of his mature period, Leibniz composed a number of works in which he suddenly and unexpectedly shifts from one of these mutually exclusive approaches to the other. Could this really be the truth?

A slight but critical adjustment to Jolley's view yields a much more appealing result. The adjustment is motivated by the fact that when Leibniz denies that monads interact, he typically denies only that they interact through a real or physical influence. Thus, after explaining to Arnauld how monads interact ideally, Leibniz reflects: 'It is thus, I believe, that the intercourse between created substances must be understood and not as a real physical influence or dependence' (G 2:57/L 337). He includes what appears to be the same qualification in the 'New System': 'It is quite true that there is no real influence of one created substance on another, speaking according to metaphysical rigor, and that all these things, with all their reality, are continually produced by the power of God' (G 4:483/WF 17). Likewise in the *Theodicy*: '[T]he establishment of this system demonstrates beyond a doubt that in the course of nature each substance is the sole cause of all its actions, and that it is free of all physical influence from every other substance, save the customary cooperation of God' (T 300).⁴⁸ And in the *Monadology*, alluding to the ideal action of one monad on

⁴⁷Jolley puts the point perhaps too gently, characterizing this duality as merely 'a hesitation in Leibniz's thought between reductionist and eliminativist approaches to the issue of causal interaction' (ibid, 594).

⁴⁸See also T 59, 61, 66, 290, 291, 400, and the Preface at G 6:45/H 68–69.

MONADIC INTERACTION

another, Leibniz remarks that ‘since a created monad cannot have a physical influence on the interior of another, it is only by this means that the one can have any dependence on the other’ (M 51). These are just a few of the available examples.⁴⁹ They suggest that the eliminative approach Leibniz favors involves not the elimination of monadic interaction *tout court*, as on Jolley’s view, but only the elimination of real or physical interaction. In view of these texts, then, we could accept Jolley’s claim that Leibniz endorses both eliminative and reductive approaches to interaction, but plausibly interpret those approaches as harmonious. We could suppose that Leibniz advocates on the one hand the elimination of *real* or *physical* monadic interaction, and on the other the reduction of monadic interaction *simpliciter* to ideal action. In that case, what he would be eliminating would be different from what he reduces, and so the two approaches would be compatible. Understanding Leibniz this way has the advantage that it allows us to see him not as vacillating between competing approaches but as advancing a single, coherent position on interaction.

Someone will perhaps object that we *must* see Leibniz as proposing to eliminate all monadic interaction, because, the foregoing passages notwithstanding, there are many texts in which he unequivocally states that created monads cannot truly interact. Let us consider some of these texts, beginning with the one Jolley provides as evidence of an eliminativist approach. In a letter of January 1688, Leibniz writes to Arnauld: ‘I maintain that one created substance does not act upon another in metaphysical rigor, that is to say with a real influence’ (G 2:133).⁵⁰ Though this remark might be taken as unmistakable evidence of the sort of unrestricted eliminative approach Jolley imputes to Leibniz, note that it can properly be so taken only if we assume that he considers all genuine action to be real. For Leibniz explicitly indicates in this passage that in denying that created substances can act ‘in metaphysical rigor’, what he means is that they cannot exert a *real* influence. His thought is evidently that we speak ‘in metaphysical rigor’ when we use words as they are ordinarily used in the ‘language of metaphysics’, in which “action” refers specifically to *real* action, that is, to an immediate determination (DM 32). But if not all genuine interaction is real, as I contend, then what Leibniz says here in no way shows that he favors simply eliminating interaction. It would show this only if we had something we do not have: an independent reason for thinking that ideal action is not genuine action, or that all genuine action is real. If instead real (or physical) action is just one kind of action, one which is direct rather than indirect and involves efficient rather than final causation, then what Leibniz denies in this text is not that monads interact but only that they interact in the usual way.

Perhaps remarks like these, of which many examples can be found, would serve Jolley’s purpose better:

⁴⁹In addition to those texts cited in the previous note, see A 6.4:1620/G 7:312/LC 311/MP 79; AG 279; G 7:344/AG 319; G 2:47/AG 76; G 2:70–71; G 2:94/AG 83; G 6:568–69/WF 197; NE 135; G 7:420/AG 346; G 4:496/WF 50–51; G 1:383/WF52; G 2:122/WF 65.

⁵⁰Cf. A 6.4:1620/G 7:312/LC 311/MP 79; C 521/AG 33/L 269; A 6.4:1638/LC 333; DM 28, 32; G 4:483/AG 143/WF 17; G 1:391/WF 54.

MONADIC INTERACTION

We could therefore say in some way and in a proper sense, though departing from custom, that one particular substance never acts upon another particular substance nor is it acted upon by it [...] (DM 14)

I do not admit any action of substances upon each other in the proper sense, since no reason can be found for one monad influencing another. (Leibniz to De Volder, 20 June 1703, L 530/G 2:251/AG 176)⁵¹

We may be tempted to infer from such statements that Leibniz rejects outright any interaction among created substances, since it might be thought that whatever is not action in the 'proper' sense, being only loosely or improperly describable as action, is not truly action. But this is not the only way these texts can be read. We could suppose, not unreasonably, that the proper sense of a term is just the metaphysically rigorous one, that is, the one customary in metaphysical contexts. We saw above that action in this latter sense is real (or physical) action. So from this point of view what Leibniz denies in these passages is only that monads can have any real (or physical) influence on one another. More to the point, on this reading that which is not action in the proper sense would fail to be action in the usual sense; but it could still be action in some genuine though non-standard sense. Thus, these texts need not be read as evidence of the sort of eliminative approach Jolley and other proponents of the traditional view purport to find in Leibniz.

The texts considered in these last two paragraphs all include some kind of qualifier which should or at least can be viewed as restricting the scope of Leibniz's claims to that action which is real or physical. They allow us to read him not as denying that monads interact *tout court*, but as denying only that they interact in the sense ordinarily in view in metaphysical contexts (i.e., the 'metaphysically rigorous' or 'proper' sense). It must be admitted, however, that other texts can be adduced which lack any such qualifier and in which Leibniz denies that monads interact. For instance, in the *Discourse* he insists that 'each substance is like a world apart, independent of every other thing except God; thus all our phenomena, that is to say all things that can ever happen to us, are only consequences of our being' (DM 14). In the 'New System' essay, he confesses to being unable to find any way of 'explaining how the body can make something pass over into the soul or vice versa, or how one created substance can communicate with another' (G 4:483/AG 142–43/WF 17). And in the *Monadology*, he argues that because monads 'have no windows through which something can enter or leave', we cannot explain 'how a monad can be altered or changed in its interior by some other creature' and consequently 'an external cause cannot influence its interior' (M 7, 11). Surely remarks such as these unequivocally support the traditional reading.

In interpreting these passages and others like them, however, we should bear two facts in mind. First, such texts are far outnumbered by those state-

⁵¹See also DM 32; T 290, 400.

MONADIC INTERACTION

ments in which Leibniz explicitly includes some kind of qualification. Declarations such as 'I maintain that our spontaneity suffers no exception, and that external things have no *physical* influence on us, to speak in philosophical rigor' (T 290, my emphasis) are much more common than unqualified claims like 'each substance is like a world apart, independent of every other thing except God' (DM 14). Second, and more important, the unqualified statements tend to occur in contexts in which Leibniz does mention the qualification or in which he affirms that monads do interact ideally. Thus consider the examples from the previous paragraph. It is true that in §14 of the *Discourse* Leibniz says that substances are 'independent of every other thing except God' and that 'all things that can ever happen to us are only consequences of our being'. But it is also true that (i) at the end of this section, he asserts that there is an element of truth in our judgements to the effect that other things act on us as causes, and (ii) later in the work, gesturing toward the theory of ideal action sketched in §15, he claims to have 'already noted how one can truly say that particular substances act on one another' (DM 27). I see no way of reconciling these passages short of understanding the unqualified remarks in §14 and elsewhere in the *Discourse* as implicitly qualified in the way Leibniz often explicitly qualifies such remarks. The same goes for the 'New System' and the *Monadology*. In the former Leibniz writes that 'the action of one substance on another is neither an emission nor a transplantation of an entity, as the vulgar conceive it, and can reasonably be taken only in the manner just stated' (G 4:486/WF 20), and in the latter he claims that 'since a created monad cannot have a physical influence on the interior of another, it is only by this means that the one can have any dependence on the other' (M 51). Both of these comments, in which Leibniz alludes to the theory of ideal action he has just sketched, seem to call for reading the unqualified denials of monadic interaction which appear elsewhere in these writings as implicitly qualified. In fact, I believe it would be reasonable, in view of these points, to take *all* the passages in which Leibniz appears to deny outright that monads interact as implicitly qualified in this way. His point, properly understood, is not that created monads cannot causally interact, but just that they cannot interact by way of a real or physical influence, that is, an immediate, efficient causal influence.

This survey exhausts the relevant sorts of text which could be cited as evidence of the sort of eliminative approach Jolley claims to find in Leibniz's writings. I have argued that, all things considered, they provide little reason for imputing such an approach to Leibniz and should instead be interpreted only as rejections of any immediate, efficient causal influence among created monads. Combine this with the point that the two-approach objection requires us to see Leibniz as vacillating in a most unlikely way between the reductive and eliminative approaches, and the result is a rather strong case for dismissing that objection. I therefore conclude that my argument against the traditional reading of Leibniz and in favor of my alternative stands.

5 The Trouble with Divine Accommodation

I want to conclude by reflecting on a complication we encounter in trying to understand Leibniz's thesis of divine accommodation. I argued above (§1) that this thesis plays a central (if not *the* central) role in his theory of ideal action, inasmuch as it provides the connection between distinct representation or intelligible explanation and activity. My suggestion was that 'one can truly say that particular substances act on one another' (DM 27) precisely because the substance with a distinct representation of the reason for certain changes has moved God (via its idea in the divine intellect) to effect changes in other substances, thus bringing the latter substances into harmony with the former. This effecting of changes is what Leibniz typically describes as God's 'ordering' [*reglant*] or 'accommodating' [*s'accommodant*] substances to one another. As my choice of the expression 'effect changes' suggests, I have thus far been taking such descriptions at face value, that is, literally. When Leibniz says that 'The modifications of one monad are the ideal causes of the modifications of other monads [...] insofar as there appear in one monad reasons which moved God from the beginning of things to establish modifications in another monad' (G 2:475/L 608), or that 'God, comparing two simple substances, finds in each reasons that require him to accommodate the other to it' (M 52), I have understood him, naturally enough, to be claiming that God in fact causes the passive substance to have certain modifications which it otherwise would not have had. Yet, there are powerful reasons for thinking that this may not be what Leibniz really had in mind.

In the first place, taking Leibniz's talk of divine accommodation at face value introduces serious metaphysical difficulties. An initial concern is that in arguing against the possibility of any physical influx in the realm of created substances, Leibniz commits himself to viewing any genuine adaptive activity on the part of God as unintelligible. He argues in §7 of the *Monadology* that no created monad can cause changes to the interior of another, because such influence would require an inexplicable transmission of either parts or accidents. There can be no exchange of parts because monads, being by nature simple, have no parts to give and could not receive the parts of another. Further, there can be no transposition of accidents: 'Accidents cannot be detached, nor can they go about outside of substances, as the sensible species of the Scholastics once did' (M 7). Hence, Leibniz concludes that no created monad can make changes to the interior of another. But then how, we may ask, is *God* able to make changes to the interior of substances, as the theory of ideal action seems to require? He cannot do so through an exchange of parts, since neither God nor created substances have parts. Nor can there be a transposition of accidents, since according to Leibniz it is impossible for accidents to be detached. The idea that God adapts substances to one another therefore seems to be just as unacceptable as the idea that one created substance physically influences another. Leibniz could of course retort that God can do what creatures cannot; but saying this does nothing to remove the air of unintelligibility surrounding the doctrine of divine accommodation. So consistency would seem to require

MONADIC INTERACTION

Leibniz to say one of two things: either that created substances can have a real or physical influence on one another after all, in which case the theory of ideal action becomes otiose, or else that God cannot change a monad's modifications, in which case there can be no ideal action as Leibniz conceives it. Either way the proposal appears doomed.⁵²

One reply available to Leibniz would be to point out that properly speaking, God adapts substances to one another only by making adjustments to his *ideas* of them prior to creation (see §1 above). Since these ideas are neither simple substances nor the modifications of another substance, it is far from clear that the argument of the *Monadology* poses any threat to divine accommodation, understood in this way. Even if making changes to the interior of another substance requires some sort of physical influx, as Leibniz maintains, it does not follow that God's making adjustments to his *own* ideas requires such an influx. Clarifying his view in this way thus allows him to deflect the original objection. But notice that it also introduces even more serious problems. For, first, it ought to be impossible for God to make changes to his ideas. Leibniz tells us that these ideas are the *essences* or *natures* of possible things.⁵³ As such they are 'eternal and necessary' (T 335). It would therefore seem that God, being unable to do the impossible, could no more change one of these ideas than he could make a necessary truth false, a point Leibniz himself exploits to great advantage in his theodicy.⁵⁴ Besides this, even if God could make changes to his ideas, there would be no point in doing so. On Leibniz's view, *all* possibilities are represented in the divine intellect; for every possible substance, there is an idea in the mind of God which corresponds to that and only that possible substance.⁵⁵ Hence, to change one possible in some possible way would be to make it qualitatively identical to some other possible already existing there. Not only would this give rise to a violation of the identity of indiscernables, but it would be pointless, since God could have simply chosen the possible which already had the desired constitution.

In view of these difficulties, we may begin to suspect that Leibniz did not mean for his talk of divine accommodation to be taken at face value. But there is more. In some of his descriptions of the process of creation, Leibniz appears to rule out the possibility of divine accommodation. For instance, he writes to Jaquelot in late 1704 that 'it is the nature of things themselves which produces their sequence prior to every decree, which God just wills to realize in finding this possibility ready-made [*toute faite*]'. A few lines later, he adds: 'The sequence of things of this world was already eternally settled [...] before all

⁵²Note that this objection differs from the point made by a number of commentators that Leibniz's rejection of real monadic interaction stands in tension with his acceptance of the doctrine that God creates and conserves monads. Those who make this point appear to overlook the difference between bringing about a change to the interior of a previously existing substance, and bringing about the substance itself, which involves no change to its interior. In contrast, my objection is to the idea of divine accommodation, which as I am interpreting it here differs from creation and conservation in that it involves making changes to the interior of a substance.

⁵³See T 7, 20, 335.

⁵⁴See, for example, T 335, 380.

⁵⁵See T 21, 189; G 6:423/H 428.

MONADIC INTERACTION

consideration of the decree that realized it, just as the properties of a circle and of a parabola are thus settled' (G 6:559–60/WF 188–89). By the 'sequence' of a thing, Leibniz means its progression from one state to the next; his point is that God finds this progression of a thing ready-made and has no more control over it than he has over the properties of geometrical figures. In the same vein, we read at T 52 that in actualizing possibles, God's decree 'leaves them just as they were in the state of pure possibility, that is to say it changes nothing either in their essence or nature, or even in their accidents, which were already represented perfectly in the idea of this possible world'.⁵⁶ Such remarks seem to leave no room for a process of adapting the ideas of things to one another prior to actualization.

If Leibniz's talk about divine accommodation is not to be taken at face value, however, then how should it be taken? One answer—the only one for which I have been able to find any textual justification—may be found at T 54, where Leibniz argues that petitionary prayer and right action can be efficacious—can be an '*ideal cause or condition*'—because 'God, foreseeing what would happen freely, ordered all other things on that basis in advance, or, what is the same, he chose that possible world in which everything was ordered in this way'. This comment inspires the thought that divine accommodation comes to nothing more than God selecting for actualization a possible which by its nature happens to accord with certain other possibles. From this point of view, God does not actually adapt possibles, despite what Leibniz's descriptions nearly always suggest; rather, God selects those possibles which already have the appropriate natures so that it is *as if* some initially disharmonious possibles had been brought into harmony.

This deflationary conception of divine accommodation has the advantage that it avoids the various objections which plague the more robust conception suggested by many of Leibniz's statements. In particular, it introduces nothing unintelligible not already present in the traditional theistic picture, involves no metaphysical absurdities, and violates none of Leibniz's principles. Nonetheless, it may invite the following objection: If it is only *as if* God adapts substances to one another, then it is only *as if* they interact, whereas Leibniz aspires to identify a sense in which they can truly be said to interact. Given that this is his goal, only the more robust conception of divine accommodation will do.

In response, one might claim that even on this deflationary conception created substances can influence one another in a way. What I have in mind can be illustrated with the example in which Jones speaks to Smith. Let us call Smith's perception of Jones state *S* and suppose that *S* occurs in Smith at time *t*. In this case, Leibniz would say that Jones rationally determines God to 'accommodate' Smith to Jones in the sense that God chooses to create Smith, whose nature determines him to be in *S* at *t*, instead of some other substance which is not in *S* at *t*; Jones so determines God because only a substance in *S* at *t* would accord with Jones, who at *t* has a rather distinct perception of the reason for

⁵⁶Cf. G 6:423–24/H 428–29.

MONADIC INTERACTION

her speaking. Under these circumstances, Jones could perhaps be viewed as a partial cause of God's choice to create Smith; for had Jones not been such as she is, God would not have selected Smith. But then Jones would also be a partial cause of Smith's being in *S* at *t*; for Smith could only have been in *S* at *t* if he had been selected for creation. If Jones is at least partially causally responsible for Smith's existing, then she is also at least partially causally responsible for Smith's being in *S* at *t*. So even on the deflationary reading of divine accommodation, one substance can truly be said to have an (ideal) influence on another.

The possibility of this sort of influence nonetheless does little to advance Leibniz's cause. In the first place, if Jones partially causes Smith to be in *S* at *t* by way of partially causing God to select Smith rather than some other substance, then Jones would equally be a partial cause of *every* state Smith is in at *any* time. Jones partially causes Smith to be in *S* at *t* in the sense that had Jones not determined God to select Smith, Smith would not exist and therefore would not be in *S* at *t*. But in this respect *S* is no different from any other state of Smith: had Jones not determined God to select Smith, Smith would not exist and therefore would never be in any state. Further, on this way of viewing the matter any substance which contributes to God's decision to select Smith—any substance, in other words, which acts ideally on Smith—would for the same reason be equally responsible for Smith's being in the various states he is in at various times, and in particular every such substance would be just as much a cause of Smith's being in *S* at *t* as Jones would be. Thus, Jones would be neither uniquely responsible for Smith's being in *S* at *t* (since many substances would be equally responsible for this), nor responsible specifically for Smith's being in *S* at *t* (since Jones would be equally responsible for Smith's being in any number of other states at various times). In contrast, Leibniz needs Jones to cause Smith to be in *S* at *t* in such a way that (i) Jones is unique among created substances in this respect and (ii) Jones causes only certain states in Smith (namely, those states, such as *S*, of which Jones is intuitively the cause).

This is not to say that on the deflationary reading, Jones can have no unique causal influence in the world. For she would at least be responsible for *there being a substance in S at t*. Had Jones not been constituted as she is, God would not have chosen to create some substance in *S* at *t* (though God could have selected substances in other states at *t* and at other times). Further, among possibles Jones alone would have moved God to select some such substance. So even on the deflationary reading Jones could have some meaningful influence on the world. She and she alone would rationally determine God to select for actualization a substance in *S* at *t*. But note that Jones would not have any significant influence on *Smith*. Smith's being in *S* at *t* would be the collective result of many factors: his having a nature which determines him to be in *S* at *t*; God, who creates and conserves Smith; and finally the vastly many possibles, including the idea of Jones, which collectively determine God to select Smith for creation. Each of these factors would be in one sense or another a cause of Smith's being in *S* at *t*. Smith would be in *S* at *t* because he exists and has a nature which determines him to be in *S* at *t*; he would exist because God

MONADIC INTERACTION

creates and conserves him; and God would create and conserve Smith because the possibles so determined him. As one of these possibles, Jones, or rather the idea of Jones, would be at best just one among vastly many partial causes of Smith's being in *S* at *t*. So Jones would have a kind of generic influence on the world, insofar as she is the cause of there being a substance in *S* at *t*, but she would not have any meaningful, specific influence on Smith or any other substance. It follows that if Leibniz intends the deflationary conception of divine accommodation, he can indeed claim to have established a sense in which created monads act externally and make a causal difference in the world. But he would fall well short of his goal of specifying a sense in which 'one can truly say that particular substances act on one another' (DM 27).

We therefore arrive at the following situation. On either of the ways I have suggested for interpreting divine accommodation, that thesis is problematic. Taken at face value, it introduces deep difficulties. But read in the deflationary fashion, it largely fails to perform its intended function. Since these interpretations appear to exhaust the possibilities, it follows that the theory of ideal action, in which divine accommodation plays an essential role, is either well-suited to perform its intended function but metaphysically problematic, or else metaphysically innocuous but ill-suited to perform its function. In either case, it seems we must conclude that the theory fails to secure the result Leibniz claims for it. Though the evidence presented above makes it hard to deny that he considers created monads capable of genuine causal interaction, this does not appear to be a position to which he is entitled given his commitment to certain views concerning the metaphysics of creation.⁵⁷

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