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Why Monads Need Appetites

The mature Leibniz often describes monads as having two types of modifications: perceptions and appetites. But why would monads need appetites? When reading secondary literature about Leibniz, it can easily look as if appetites are superfluous: some scholars describe the inner workings of monads without saying much, if anything, about appetites. Instead, they focus on perceptions and explain the transition to new perceptions by reference to prior perceptions together with the underlying primitive force or law of the series. These interpretations appear to be doing just fine without invoking appetites. And, in fact, there are texts in which Leibniz himself neglects appetites almost completely. Some passages suggest that perceptions cause other perceptions,¹ and other texts indicate that the monads themselves cause perceptions directly. If that is the case, it is not clear what purpose appetites serve; they do not appear to be needed for explaining monadic change.

One possible response to the question why monads need appetites is the following. Appetites, according to Leibniz, are monadic tendencies to transition to new perceptions. Perhaps without such tendencies, no change would occur in a monad. On this interpretation, a full explanation of monadic change needs to invoke tendencies, and those in turn are (or include) appetites. I think that this response is partially correct, as I will argue later. Yet, it does not fully explain the function of appetites. How precisely are appetites (viewed as tendencies) supposed to figure into the explanation—do they function as causes of change, and if so, what kinds of causes? Are they efficient, final, or formal causes, or perhaps causes of yet another type? Or might they figure into the explanation in some non-causal way?

This paper explores possible answers to the question what role appetites play in the lives of monads. There is not enough time to discuss these answers in much detail or exhaust the logical space, but I will briefly consider the options that strike me as the most promising contenders. These options are: (1) appetites are superfluous; there is no sense in which they explain or cause monadic change; (2) appetites are formal causes; (3) appetites are final causes; (4) appetites are efficient causes; (5) appetites are ultimately the same as perceptions (or aspects of perceptions), and perceptions in turn cause or explain monadic change; and (6) appetites are not causally involved in monadic change, but they are explanatory in a loose, derivative sense. I will argue for a version of the last option. The resulting picture of monadic change is admittedly radical and strange but there are excellent reasons to embrace it.

The first option—which I call the ‘No Role Option’—is that appetites are completely redundant; they do not do anything, that is, they do not contribute to the explanation or causation of monadic change. If that is correct, there might still be a reason why God created monads with appetites. Perhaps monads have appetites simply because that contributes to the perfection of the world; maybe appetites allow God to pack more variety into a harmonious whole. Yet, I think that this option should be the last resort because the way that Leibniz talks about appetites suggests that they are explanatory in some sense. As mentioned earlier, they are the tendencies of monads to transition to new perceptions, and Leibniz does (at least sometimes) appear to treat those tendencies as figuring into the explanation of the transition. Hence, if any of the other options work, we should reject the No Role Option.

A second option—which I call the ‘Formal Cause Option’—is that appetites are formal causes of monadic change. I do not know of anybody who defends this interpretation, but the thought might be that appetites explain or specify the form (that is, presumably, the properties or the content) of any new monadic state. Even though this suggestion makes a

¹ See e.g. Leibniz’s notes on Stahl (in: Sarah Carvallo (ed.): *La controverse entre Stahl et Leibniz*, Paris 2004, pp. 76f.) and Leibniz’s reply to Pierre Bayle, GP IV, 533.

certain amount of sense, there are reasons to reject it. When Leibniz talks about formal causation—which does not happen very frequently—he typically suggests that souls or monads are formal causes.² That fits well with what Leibniz says elsewhere: each monad has a nature that specifies all of its states.³ This nature, or a substance with such a nature, appears to be the most natural locus of formal causation. Hence, appetites are not very plausible candidates for formal causes.⁴

Let us turn to the third and more promising option: appetites are final causes of monadic change; I call this the ‘Final Cause Option.’ At least one scholar endorses that interpretation,⁵ and there is some indirect evidence for it: Leibniz claims in many texts that the transitions in monads involve final causation, though he does not spell this out in much detail. However, when understood straightforwardly, viewing appetites as final causes would constitute an extremely odd and idiosyncratic way of understanding final causation. The final cause of a change is traditionally the end or goal of that change. Accordingly, the final cause is typically the object of a desire or appetite;⁶ the appetite is not itself the final cause, on any traditional account of which I am aware. That also makes good philosophical sense.

But maybe we can amend the Final Cause Option: appetites seem to be end-directed states, so perhaps the ends at which these appetites aim are the final causes of monadic change. The role of appetites would then be to point to the ends at which monads aim when they change. That sounds much better, and I believe it is indeed part of the correct account. Yet, it does not entirely explain the role of appetites because it does not tell us how precisely appetites, viewed as end-directed states, figure into the explanation of monadic changes that occur for the sake of those ends. How does the presence of an end-directed state explain changes?⁷ One possible answer is that appetites also act as efficient causes, producing transitions to the ends toward which they point (or transitions to means to those ends). That is the option I will consider next. In the end, however, I do not think that option works either. Instead, as I will argue later, appetites are merely modalities or abstractions of primitive monadic force, and that force is the only thing that is capable of efficient causation.

Let us then consider the suggestion that appetites are efficient causes; I call this fourth option the ‘Efficient Cause Option.’ If appetites were efficient causes of monadic change, they would clearly play a crucial role. This option is far more popular than the previous ones;

² See e.g. *Causa Dei* §46; letter to Remond, January 10, 1714, GP III, 606.

³ See e.g. his remarks on Lamy: “the complete nature of each individual implicitly contains everything that will happen to it” (GP IV, 582).

⁴ Sukjae Lee agrees; he cites philosophical reasons against identifying the formal cause of monadic change with appetitions (“Leibniz on Spontaneity: A Sketch of Formal and Final Causation,” in: *Einheit in der Vielheit: Vorträge; VIII. Internationaler Leibniz-Kongress*, vol. 1. Hannover 2006, pp. 445f.).

⁵ Laurence Carlin: “The Non-Aristotelian Novelty of Leibniz’s Teleology,” in: *Leibniz Review* 21 (2011), pp. 69–90, here pp. 83f., and “Leibniz on Final Causes,” in: *Journal of the History of Philosophy* 44.2 (2006), pp. 217–33, here p. 232.

⁶ There is a debate in the medieval period about whether the end or the perception of the end is the final cause. However, in either case, the desire or appetite for this end is not the final cause. (I thank Stephan Schmid for pointing this out).

⁷ Here, someone might object that I am asking too much. Final causation requires end-directedness, but perhaps it is unfair to ask about the mechanism by which the end-directed state leads to the action; maybe there is not and should not be more to say about that. An agent possesses an appetite for a particular end, and this appetite is the reason that the agent then performs actions aiming at that end. That may be fair enough. But here is another way to put my worry: there appears to be end-directedness at the most fundamental level in monads as well. The nature of a monad—or its substantial form, entelechy, law of the series, or primitive force—is, at bottom, a force that is directed toward the entire series of changes that will occur in the monad. But if that is the case, Leibniz at least owes us an explanation of the relationship between the end-directedness at that level and the end-directedness at the level of appetites. After all, the fundamental end-directedness may seem to make any other end-directedness superfluous. Monads may appear to be teleologically overdetermined.

several interpreters embrace it.⁸ What makes it appealing is not just that it gives appetites a well-defined explanatory role but also that appetites are in some respects excellent candidates for being efficient causes. After all, appetites appear to be active, force-like entities.⁹ Leibniz even describes them as the “action of the internal principle which brings about the change or passage from one perception to another.”¹⁰ Passages like this one do indeed make it sound as if appetites are efficient causes.

Yet, there are severe problems with the Efficient Cause Option; those problems are sufficient reasons, in my view, to reject it. First of all, there is no clear and direct textual evidence for this option, as far as I can tell. Leibniz does sometimes suggest that perceptions are efficient causes of other perceptions, but I do not know of passages where he makes similar claims about appetites. The passage from the *Monadologie* that I quoted earlier could be read in that way: it defines ‘appetite’ as the “action of the internal principle which brings about the change or passage from one perception to another.”¹¹ The expression ‘bring about’ (French: *fait*) is indeed strongly suggestive of efficient causation. Yet, it is at least as plausible to read that passage as saying that the internal principle, not the appetite, brings about the change in perceptions.¹² The appetite is the action of an internal principle, and it is that principle which brings about the change.

An even more compelling reason to reject the Efficient Cause Option is that Leibniz appears to hold that monadic states cannot be efficient causes of other states. After all, Leibniz suggests in a few places that only substances are strictly speaking efficient causes.¹³ In *De ipsa natura*, for instance, he says, “everything that acts is an individual substance,”¹⁴ and in *Nouveaux essais* he notes, “[f]aculties or qualities do not act; rather, substances act through faculties.”¹⁵ There is even textual evidence that when Leibniz talks of monadic states as causally active, he is talking loosely and at bottom holds that only the substances themselves can be efficient causes. Leibniz says in an appendix to the *Theodicée* that “[w]hen we say that an intelligent substance is moved by the goodness of its object ... [the object’s] representation acts in the substance, or rather, the substance acts upon itself, insofar as it is disposed and influenced by this representation.”¹⁶ I take this to be strong evidence that,

⁸ Rutherford, for instance, claims that “[t]he appetitions associated with particular monadic states are productive of new states. Hence they are efficient causes of those states” (Donald Rutherford: “Leibniz on Spontaneity,” in: Donald Rutherford and Jan A. Cover (eds.): *Leibniz: Nature and Freedom*. Oxford 2005, pp. 156–180, here p. 166; see also “Laws and Powers in Leibniz,” in: Eric Watkins (ed.): *The Divine Order, the Human Order, and the Order of Nature*, Oxford 2013, pp. 149–174, here p. 167). Similarly, Carlin contends that “appetites, essential constituents of final causes, are efficient producers of subsequent perceptual states” (“Leibniz on Final Causes,” p. 231), and Bolton argues that “acts of monads have efficient causes, namely, appetites which are efficacious tendencies” (Martha Brandt Bolton: “Change in the Monad,” in: Eric Watkins (ed.): *The Divine Order, the Human Order, and the Order of Nature*, Oxford 2013, pp. 175–194, here p. 178).

⁹ See *Nouveaux essais*, A VI, 6, 172f.

¹⁰ *Monadologie* §15.

¹¹ *Monadologie* §15.

¹² The original reads: “L’action du principe interne qui fait le changement ou le passage d’une perception à une autre, peut être appelé *Appetition*.”

¹³ Marc E. Bobro and Kenneth Clatterbaugh argue for this interpretation at length (“Unpacking the Monad: Leibniz’s Theory of Causality,” in: *Monist* 79.3 (1996), pp. 408–425, here p. 416). See also Stephan Schmid (*Finalursachen in der frühen Neuzeit*, Berlin 2011, pp. 326f. and 340f.), Marc E. Bobro (“Leibniz on Concurrence and Efficient Causation,” in: *Southern Journal of Philosophy* 46.3 (2008), pp. 317–38, here p. 329) and Julia Jorati (“Leibniz on Causation—Part 1,” in: *Philosophy Compass* 10.6 (2015), pp. 389–97, here p. 394).

¹⁴ §9, GP IV, 509.

¹⁵ A VI, 6, 174.

¹⁶ GP VI, 423. Along similar lines, Leibniz writes to Clarke that “properly speaking, motives do not act on the mind as weights do on a balance, but it is rather the mind that acts by virtue of the motives, which are its dispositions to act” (Fifth letter to Clarke, §15).

strictly speaking, monads themselves—rather than their prior states—are the efficient causes of their current states.

Moreover, Leibniz appears to hold that the series of perceptions and appetites in a monad are continuous,¹⁷ and therefore not composed out of instantaneous states. This means, among other things, that there are further states between any two instantaneous monadic states. But if that is the case, it is not clear how later states could be caused by earlier ones.¹⁸ We cannot say that one instantaneous state—whether it is an appetite or a perception—causes the next, because there is no directly adjacent next state.¹⁹ The picture according to which monadic states form a neat causal chain cannot be correct. At best, there could be some kind of leapfrogging: each state could be caused by a prior but non-adjacent state. Yet, that is problematic because it amounts to something like causation at a (temporal) distance.

A fifth option is that appetites are not fundamentally distinct from perceptions; they just are the perceptions considered differently, and perceptions in turn cause or explain monadic change. I call this the ‘Aspect of Perception Option.’ There is in fact some textual evidence supporting such an interpretation,²⁰ and a few interpreters embrace it.²¹ This option would help answer our question because it implies that the explanatory or causal role of appetites need not be distinct from that of perceptions. Yet, there is also evidence that appetites are separate from perceptions.²² For instance, Leibniz sometimes says that appetite and perception in created substances correspond to will and intellect in God,²³ and Leibniz considers it crucial that God’s will and God’s intellect are distinct in a rather robust sense.²⁴ Further, even if appetites were merely aspects of perceptions (or perceptions viewed differently), the problems noted earlier do not entirely disappear. We would still need an account of how perceptions viewed as appetites—or the appetitive aspects of perceptions—figure into the explanation of monadic change. Moreover, the arguments against viewing

¹⁷ Leibniz says so explicitly, for instance, in *Monadologie* §10 and in a letter to de Volder, January 21, 1704 (in: Paul Lodge (ed.): *The Leibniz-De Volder Correspondence*. New Haven 2013, p. 289).

¹⁸ See John Whipple: “The Structure of Leibnizian Simple Substances,” in: *British Journal for the History of Philosophy* 18.3 (2010), pp. 379–410.

¹⁹ Leibniz himself at times talks as if one state causes the next; see e.g. a letter to Foucher from 1686, GP I, 382; a letter to Jaquelot from February 9, 1704, GP III, 464; an undated letter to Jaquelot, GP III, 468; *Monadologie* §§22; 26; notes on Stahl, Carvallo pp. 76f.; remarks on Arnauld’s Letter, May 1686, GP II, 57; remarks on Lamy [1702], GP IV, 579; reply to Bayle [1705?], GP IV, 533. Yet, the reasons just cited show that he must be talking loosely in those passage. His understanding of continuity does not allow for immediately adjacent instantaneous states.

²⁰ Leibniz writes, for instance, that “the soul ... involves a composite tendency, that is to say a multitude of present thoughts, each of which tends towards a particular change, depending on what is involved in it” (GP IV, 562). This passage seems to say that perceptions themselves, rather than appetites that are distinct from perceptions, are or contain the monad’s tendencies to change its perceptions. Similarly, Leibniz writes to Masson that because the objects of our perceptions are composite, “these perceptions are called composite, as are their tendencies or appetites” (GP VI, 627). Here again, Leibniz appears to suggest that perceptions themselves have tendencies.

²¹ Robert McRae, for instance, writes that they are merely “the same modifications viewed differently” (*Leibniz: Perception, Apperception, and Thought*, Toronto 1976, p. 60). Other interpreters who hold that appetites and perceptions are not fundamentally distinct include Whipple (“The Structure of Leibnizian Simple Substances,” p. 407n56), Kenneth Clatterbaugh (*Leibniz’s Doctrine of Individual Accidents* (= *Studia Leibnitiana Sonderheft* 4) 1973, p. 9), Martha Brandt Bolton (“Leibniz’s Theory of Cognition,” in: Brandon Look (ed.): *The Continuum Companion to Leibniz*, London 2011, p. 145).

²² Leibniz writes to Wolff, for instance, that “whatever one may understand generally in the soul can be reduced to two things: the soul’s expression of the present state of external things, in accordance with its body; and the tendency to a new expression” (GLW 56). If Leibniz thought that appetites and perceptions were the same thing viewed differently, it would be misleading to also claim that they are “two things.” See also *Principes de la nature et de la grace* §2; GP VII, 501f.; GP VII, 330; Lodge p. 311.

²³ See e.g. *Monadologie* §48.

²⁴ *Remarques sur le livre de l’origine du mal* §21 (GP VI, 423); *Theodicee* §149; *Monadologie* §46.

appetites as efficient causes of change also apply to perceptions, no matter whether they are considered as representations or as tendencies. Much more needs to be said in order to settle the matter, but it should be clear that the Aspect of Perception Option faces significant challenges.

A final option is that appetites do not play a causal role at all; they play some other, non-causal but nevertheless explanatory role. I call this the ‘Non-Causal Option.’ At first, this option might sound like a non-starter. After all, causation and explanation are very closely connected for Leibniz,²⁵ as they typically are for philosophers who accept something like the Aristotelian account of causation. Yet, the Non-Causal Option has a lot going for it. In fact, I think it is the correct one. To see why, remember what I said earlier about the series of perceptions and appetites: these series are continuous. That means that they are not composed out of instantaneous states: Leibniz adamantly denies that one can compose a continuous series out of instantaneous entities.²⁶ Nor can such a series be composed of temporally extended static states, because monads are supposed to change constantly.²⁷ Moreover, note that Leibniz often describes monads in terms of forces—primitive and derivative, as well as active and passive. Talking about perceptions and appetites is supposed to be a different way of characterizing this fundamental metaphysical reality.

What, then, is the status of instantaneous monadic states, such as individual perceptions and appetites? Perhaps it is the following: instantaneous monadic states are merely modalities abstracted from a continuous series of modifications of primitive force. Individual appetites are instantaneous manifestations of a monad’s primitive force, pointing to ends that the monad is pursuing. This makes monadic states analogous to points, which Leibniz views as mere modalities of lines.²⁸ If this is correct, the series of perceptions and appetites is not composed out of instantaneous states but is rather metaphysically prior to them. In accordance with the present proposal, a monad’s states are coherent and intelligible as a series not because there are causal relations between them but rather because they have a unified source or basis. By way of analogy, it is like the coherence of a bird’s song, which is explained not by causal relations among different notes, but rather by the fact that the song consists in a continuous stream of air that the bird produces and that is modified in a lawful fashion.

Admittedly, the current proposal is not very far removed from the No Role Option because earlier states do not provide genuine explanations for later states. The series is metaphysically prior to the modalities, and hence one modality of the series does not cause or genuinely explain a later modality. Yet, because the series is perfectly lawful, it is possible to predict with certainty later states from earlier states, which might be the reason that Leibniz sometimes talks as if prior states explain later states. They are explanatory in a derivative or epistemic sense. Moreover, the current proposal provides a more satisfactory explanation for the existence of appetites than the No Role Option: appetites exist because they result from primitive force, not just because they add variety to the world.

²⁵ See e.g. GP VII, 289/C 533; A VI, 4, 1620.

²⁶ See e.g. note on Foucher’s objection, GP IV, 491; *Nouveaux essais*, A VI, 6, 152. See Whipple, who discusses this problem in detail (“The Structure of Leibnizian Simple Substances”).

²⁷ See Donald Rutherford for an explanation of why the states cannot be infinitesimal (“Leibniz on Infinitesimals and the Reality of Force,” in: Ursula Goldenbaum and Douglas Jesseph (eds.): *Infinitesimal Differences: Controversies between Leibniz and his Contemporaries*. Berlin 2008, pp. 255–280).

²⁸ Passages in which Leibniz talks about lines and points in this way include Leibniz’s note on Foucher’s objection (1695), GP IV, 491 and *Theodicee* §384. My interpretation of the relationship between instantaneous monadic states and the underlying primitive force of a monad receives support from a letter to de Volder (January 21, 1704): “the persisting thing itself, insofar as it involves all cases, has primitive force, so that primitive force is like the law of a series, and derivative force is like a determination that designates some term in the series” (Lodge, p. 287).

Yet, there is a potential problem with my proposal. Leibniz suggests in a few places that whatever cannot be resolved into primary constituents, or whatever has indefinite parts, cannot be real.²⁹ In a letter to Des Bosses, Leibniz puts this rather bluntly: “In actual things, simples are prior to aggregates; in ideal things, the whole is prior to the part.”³⁰ This might be a problem because series of monadic states are arguably more than merely ideal things. How, then, can it be true that they cannot be resolved into primary constituents? I think we can solve that problem. Leibniz does hold that a body can only be real to the extent that it is resolvable into simple, indivisible things,³¹ and he clearly holds the same about substances.³² Nevertheless, I see no reason to extend this to something that is neither a substance nor a body, such as a series of modifications.³³ In other words, I do not see why such series would have to be composed of discrete parts in order to be real. After all, a series of monadic states is merely a complex modification of primitive force, which in turn is indivisible, unified, and real. Such a series does not need to derive its reality from constituent parts.³⁴

The Non-Causal Option strikes me as the clear winner. Given Leibniz’s commitments to the continuity of monadic change, and given what Leibniz sometimes says about the causes of monadic states, this option appears to be his best shot at avoiding inconsistency.

²⁹ See e.g. letter to de Volder, June 30, 1704, Lodge p. 303; January 19, 1706, Lodge p. 339.

³⁰ July 31, 1709 (in: Brandon Look and Donald Rutherford (eds.): *The Leibniz-Des Bosses Correspondence*, New Haven 2007, p. 141). Similarly in a letter to de Volder, October 11, 1705, Lodge p. 327.

³¹ See e.g. letter to de Volder, January 21, 1704, Lodge pp. 285f.; June 30, 1704, Lodge p. 303.

³² See e.g. *Monadologie* §2; *Principes de la nature et de la grace* §1.

³³ Leibniz in fact states explicitly in at least one passage that “actual substantial things” have to result from “a multitude of real unities” (note on Foucher’s objection, GP IV, 491). In another passage, he adds that “in real things, namely bodies, the parts are not indefinite” (letter to de Volder, June 30, 1704, Lodge p. 303). Insofar as series of perceptions or appetites are neither “actual substantial things” nor bodies, I do not see why they could not be prior to instantaneous monadic states.

³⁴ See Arthur and McGuire, who also discuss this problem (Richard Arthur: “Introduction,” in: *The Labyrinth of the Continuum: Writings on the Continuum Problem, 1672-1686*, New Haven 2001, p. lxxxviii, James E. McGuire: “‘Labyrinthus Continui’: Leibniz on Substance, Activity, and Matter,” in: Peter K. Machamer and Robert G. Turnbull (eds.): *Motion and Time, Space and Matter*. Columbus 1976, pp. 290–326, here p. 313). Whipple proposes an interpretation on which it makes sense to talk of next and previous perceptual states. His solution is that individual perceptions are temporally extended intervals, whose temporal boundaries are reflectively specified by the monad (“The Structure of Leibnizian Simple Substances,” pp. 400ff.). However, he also holds that monadic states are not ultimately distinct from the substance; successive states exist only at the phenomenal level (p. 407).