"Monism, Idealism, and Panentheism"
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Can three metaphysical wrongs make a right? If we were to list contemporary views far enough outside the mainstream that they appear in surveys mostly for the sake of completeness, three good candidates would be *monism* in metaphysics, *idealism* in the philosophy of mind, and *panentheism* in the philosophy of religion. These views are not entirely without defenders, and each has received renewed attention in analytic circles over the last fifteen years. But for the most part, they each appear less viable than their more popular alternatives, namely ontological pluralism, physicalism, and traditional theism, respectively.

And yet, when monism, idealism, and panentheism are appropriately combined, some of the challenging questions that each face independently can be answered. We might think of this trio as mutually reinforcing, or so I will argue here. More concretely, I will argue that (a) idealism provides a promising account of the 'in' relation needed by panentheism; (b) panentheism provides idealism a unifying mind to anchor its dependence claims; and (c) together they comprise a non-mereological form of priority monism.

Showing a relationship of internal support is obviously far from demonstrating truth, but exploring this combination will expose new theoretical choice points and offer a distinctive view that invites further consideration. Furthermore, an idealist form of panentheistic monism turns out to be consistent with some of the downstream commitments of those more popular alternatives, even though it also does not require them. Indeed, this flexibility will be one of the view's most surprising and promising strengths.

At the same time, the metaphysical wilds of panentheistic idealist monism contain its own challenges. But in what is either philosophical serendipity or just an occasion to reduce one's credences yet further, there are *even less* mainstream views available to the panentheistic idealist to help them fill out their account and address internal problems. If three wrongs can't make a right, how about six or seven?

1. **A historical anchor**

Although the main focus of this paper is not historical or interpretative, I will sometimes draw on the insights of long dead philosophers, most especially early moderns, to identify and fill out a view. To help us get in the right frame of mind, let's begin with a non-early modern historical anchor: an early dialogue by Moses Mendelssohn, first published in 1755.[1]

Mendelssohn was keenly interested in discovering the most significant point of disagreement between Spinozists and Leibnizians. Plausible candidates might be disputes over whether there are any finite substances, or contingent events, or final causes. These can be understood as disagreements over *what* there is, disagreements about existence claims.

But according to Mendelssohn, the deepest difference between Spinozism and Leibnizianism is not about what exists, even if there are downstream disagreements over exactly what our world contains:

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[1] The dialogue was later revised and first republished in 1761 in his *Philosophische Schriften*. All translations are taken, with slight modification, from Mendelssohn 1997. See works cited for abbreviations to primary texts.

> You know, the Leibnizians, as it were, attribute a twofold existence [*ein zweifaches Dasein*] to the world. It existed, to use their language, among possible worlds in the divine intellect prior to the divine decree. Because it is the best, God preferred it over all possible worlds and allowed it to actually exist outside him. Now Spinoza remained at that first stage of existence. He believed that a world never became actual outside God…but instead was always to be found in the divine intellect alone (PW 108).

On Mendelssohn's construal, Spinozists and Leibnizians agree that "the world" exists, perhaps among other possible worlds, within the divine intellect and independently of any further divine action, such as creation or actualization by a divine volition. Hence, both sides agree that the difference between the actual and the merely possible is not a difference between the existent and the non-existent.[2]

Instead, Mendelssohn thinks Spinozists and Leibnizians disagree most sharply about the relationship between God and the world. Spinozists think our world is wholly within God's mind and that it does not exist except insofar as it is contained therein. Leibnizians deny this, ascribing to the world an extra-mental, extra-divine existence.

Mendelssohn describes this extra Leibnizian step as positing a "two-fold existence" to the world, but that claim is a bit ambiguous. It could be read as invoking multiple kinds of existence, akin to Descartes' distinction between formal and objective *being* or Kris McDaniel's account of multiple fundamental quantifiers.[3] On this version of Leibnizianism, the actual world exists in two ways or has two kinds of being, one within and one "outside" the divine intellect. *One world, existing in two different ways.*

Another option, which I prefer conceptually (though not necessarily interpretatively), construes the difference in terms of *dependence*. On this version of Leibnizianism, our world exists partially in virtue of a divine act of mental representation ("in the divine intellect") and partially in virtue of a divine volition ("the divine decree"). This treats "two-fold existence" as two-fold *dependence*, and it uses a univocal, wide-scope quantifier.[4] *One world, existing simpliciter, in virtue of two divine acts.*

Mendelssohn's friend Lessing went on to argue that Leibnizians lack a satisfying account of why God did not remain at "that first stage," and I have argued elsewhere that there are powerful internal pressures on theistic Leibnizians to, in effect, remain Spinozists here, but we can postpone that debate for another day.[5] Instead, I want to explore what Mendelssohn describes as the "Spinozist" view, which I will present as a particular combination of three views: panentheism, idealism, and monism.

In *panentheist* terms, it is the thesis that all things are *in* God in virtue of being wholly contained in God's mind. In *idealist* terms, it holds that everything that exists besides God is merely an object of a divine representation. And in *monist* terms, it is a non-mereological form of

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[2] As a pure interpretation of Spinoza and Leibniz's own views, Mendelssohn is incorrect on both fronts. Spinoza denies that the world exists solely in God's intellect (*E* 2p6c), and although Leibniz accepts the *reality* of non-actual possibles and quantifies over them, he denies that they *exist* (*PE* 20). But Mendelssohn is not interested primarily in interpretation; he is trying to construct "the form under which Spinoza's system can exist with reason and religion" (PW 108).

[3] For Descartes, see section 3 below; see McDaniel (2017).

[4] For more general reasons to treat at least some putative debates about existence as debates about dependence, see Schaffer (2009).

[5] See *PTW* 30-31 and Newlands (2021). Mendelssohn later defended Leibnizians on this point; for discussion, see Bischof (2024).

priority monism in which the Many are representationally dependent upon the One. Unpacking these claims will show why someone inclined toward one ought to find the other two attractive as well.

2. Panentheism

The view that Mendelssohn ascribes to Spinozists, those who believe that "a world never became actual outside God," is a form of *panentheism*. That label is usually reserved for a group of 19th and 20th century philosophers and theologians,[6] but Spinoza also affirms the ontological core of panentheism: "Whatever is, is in God" (*E*1p15).[7] Although panentheism is often associated with additional theological and philosophical commitments, I will focus on its core ontological thesis, usually expressed in terms of containment: everything besides God is *in* God.[8] Panentheism has been discussed far less than traditional forms of theism, but in one of those head-spinning epicycles of intellectual history, it has become *au courant* again. As Oliver Crisp (2019, 23) wryly notes, "All the cool kids want to be panentheists."

Panentheism is usually pitched as a kind of *via media* between two more familiar *theisms*: traditional monotheism, on the one hand, and pantheism on the other. Contra traditional monotheism, panentheism denies that creatures are so ontologically distinct from God as to be properly characterized as finite substances, as things which are wholly in themselves and not in another. Contra pantheism, panentheists deny that God is identical to the world or to the collection of the world's entities.

To express this panentheistic middle in terms of containment, an asymmetry is usually invoked: the world is wholly in God, but there is "more" to God than just the world. Even as a slogan, that is a very loose formulation. But it has proven difficult to give a more precise characterization of panentheism. Theism and pantheism are themselves such wide-ranging families of views that it is challenging to identify a proposition that is true on panentheism but which no self-identifying traditional theist or pantheist accepts. For instance, as Ryan Mullins (2016) has pointed out, some accounts of panentheism describe God's relationship to the world in ways that sound like versions of *omnipresence* in traditional theism. In contemporary analytic philosophy of religion, this has led to a so-called "demarcation problem" for panentheism.[9]

But there is a more pressing worry beyond mere classification of abstract labels: panentheists need a coherent account of the ontological core of their view. In particular, they need an account of the *en* that is consistent with both the universality of the contained – the *pan* – and the divinity of the container – the *theos*.[10]

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[6] Standard lists include Karl Krause (who coined the term while classifying Schelling and Hegel as panentheists), Alfred North Whitehead, Charles Hartshorne, Jürgen Moltmann and Philip Clayton.

[7] One complication in Spinoza is that he thinks God is also in God, a symmetrical containment that is distinct from the asymmetrical way in which everything else is in God (*E* 1d3; 1a1). I will focus on the purely asymmetrical version.

[8] Göcke (2013) and Stenmark (2019) rightly point out that many of the positions standardly affirmed by panentheists, such as non-coercive divine action, divine passibility and temporality, and various forms of emergentism have been embraced by non-classical theists as well.

[9] For just a few examples, see Göcke (2013); Mullins (2016); Stenmark (2019); Leidenhag (2020).

[10] One might think that the ontology of panentheism should be expressed in terms of ontological categories rather than dependence relations, such as the theses that there is only one substance, and it is divine. But traditionally, substancehood itself is defined in terms of dependence relations, such as that which is in itself and not in another and/or that which is an ultimate bearer of predications that cannot itself be predicated of anything else.

For our purposes, we can treat the *in* relation as something like a determinable form of ontological dependence, of which there are several possible determinates. Panentheists ought to specify which determinate sense of *being in* they intend, as not every way of *being in* will be apt. To help us keep track in what follows, I'll give this question a label and generic formulation:

Specification Worry: what is the specific *in* relation in panentheism?

I will not run through every possible reply, but considering a few will illustrate the challenges of addressing the Specification Worry. One very straightforward sense of "in" is spatial location, akin to the way my desk is in my office. In this spirit, panentheists might hold that God's attributes include the world's spatiotemporal structure, either by directly having that structure or by having a structure of which our world's spacetime is a proper part.[11] Call this *spatial panentheism.*

As it stands, spatial panentheism alone will not adequately capture the supposedly tight connection between God and the world. This is because spatiotemporal locational facts alone do not seem to fully ground facts about the existence and natures of occupants, at least without further metaphysical commitments. Consider two worlds whose spacetimes are isometric. It is conceivable that they nevertheless differ with respect to occupants and natures; e.g., a fox occupies the region in one world that is occupied by a bronze fox sculpture in the corresponding region in the other. Unless the panentheist also embraces further substantive claims, such as supersubstantivalism (e.g., material objects are identical with spacetime regions) or structuralism (e.g., facts about spatiotemporal relational structure fully ground facts about the existence and natures of occupants), plus physicalism (e.g., all mental facts are fully grounded in spatiotemporal facts), the world being spatially contained in God would leave too much of the world "beyond" God for panentheism.

A different, more intimate way of *being in* involves the relationship between properties and their substantial bearers. Applied to the *in* of panentheism, *property panentheism* is the view that the world, or everything in the world, is a property of God.[12] Of course, property panentheists cannot accept Platonism about properties, lest they attribute too much independence to the world. They must instead treat properties as immanent universals or, more likely, as individualized ways of being a thing, what early moderns called *modes* and might now be called *tropes*. On this version, panentheism becomes the very Spinozistic-sounding thesis that everything besides God is a mode of God, a way God is.

On its own, property panentheism raises consistency worries familiar to monists and unrestricted combinatorialists. How can one thing, even if divine, be both circular and triangular, both red all over and green all over at the same time? Absent a consistent indexing strategy, the property panentheist will be committed to the striking thesis that there are no fundamental metaphysical exclusion relations in the world and that no categorical division runs so deep that cross-categorical exemplification is metaphysically impossible.[13]

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[11] Mullins suggests panentheists should accept a version of this, namely that "the universe is located in absolute space and time, and [absolute] space and time are divine attributes" (2016, 243).

[12] See Göcke (2013) for a version of this, though I do not see why panentheists would need to treat the world as a whole as a single divine property.

[13] A natural starting point for indexing would be to spatialtemporal locations, but this would commit property panentheists to spatial panentheism, with its attendant worries and commitments. For discussion of more complex indexing strategies in the context of Spinoza's property panentheism, see chapter two of Newlands (2018).

Property panentheism also raises concerns about the nature of God. Suppose every property in our world is a way that God is. Among those properties are *being divisible*, *being limited, being in pain*, *being morally depraved*. Are these also ways that God is? If so, panentheism will turn out to hold views of God that are much further from theism than advertised. And lest panentheists nod too enthusiastically here, note that it is one thing to observe that on panentheism, God is especially close to us in our suffering; it is quite another to add that God is also a morally depraved psychopath.

This points to a second, more general worry for the metaphysics of panentheism. On at least many ways of *being in*, features of the contained become features of the container. If a part of the world is horrendously evil, then on mereological forms of panentheism, part of God is horrendously evil. If being weak-willed is a way of being, then on property panentheism, God is weak-willed. In general, our world seems to be full of dependence structures, limitations, horrors, and all manner of things that even liberal-minded theists will want to refrain from ascribing directly to God.

Panentheists could respond by bravely trying to reduce all inappropriate mundane features to theistic-friendly properties, or they could bite the bullet and admit that the divine nature is far more sullied, messier, chaotic, and even morally depraved than orthodoxy claims.[14] That would be to modify the *pan* or the *theos* – albeit in pretty far-reaching ways.

But notice that these worries arise insofar as panentheists accept a permeable *in*-relation, such as property exemplification. The features of the world bleed through and become features of God in virtue of how the world depends on God.[15] Panentheists ought to prefer a form of *being in* that allows the world to be wholly contained in God without thereby converting the world's features into features of God's own nature. Is there such a form of being in?

> **Containment Worry**: Can the world be wholly contained *in* God without its features thereby being exemplified in God's own nature?

In the next section, I will argue that a certain *idealist* form of panentheism delivers promising replies to the Specification and Containment worries. The historical kicker is that this way of defending Mendelssohn's "Spinozist" will draw heavily on Leibnizian resources.

3. Idealism

If panentheism is plagued by a looseness that allows for only broad generalizations, discussions of idealism face the opposite worry: there are so many established variants that it is difficult to speak in general terms. I will focus on metaphysical forms of idealism that ascribe a mental dependence to physical entities. For example, early modern forms of idealism hold that *bodies* depend on a mind's *ideas*.

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[14] For a fuller version of this dilemma, see Newlands (2016).

[15] For a different version of panentheism that stumbles here, see Adams (2021, 185–193). According to Adams, the world is in God in the sense of being the intentional object of a divine state of consciousness. Although that is close to the form of panentheism I present below, being in by being the object of a subject's direct consciousness implies that God is the direct experiential subject of *unjustified horror causing*, a worrisome bleed through from the world to God's own nature.

The most familiar early modern version is *Berkeleyan* idealism, according to which bodies are constituted by bundles of regularly co-occurring, involuntary mental states of minds.[16] This view invokes a *constitution* relation between mental and physical entities, and it holds that the constituents of bodies are experiential, conscious mental states (*perceptions* in the pure Berkeleyan version).

However, recall Mendelssohn's framing of the Spinozist view: the world is "to be found in the divine intellect alone" (*PW* 108). This suggests that the world is wholly contained in the divine intellect without being directly constituted by features of God's mind, such as by occurrent divine perceptions. This points toward a different form of early modern idealism, namely what I will call *Leibnizian idealism*, according to which bodies are merely the well-founded, internal objects of mental representations.[17]

The machinery of Leibnizian idealism relies on a key distinction in the nature of mental representations, between what some early moderns call the *form* and the *object* of an idea, a distinction that arguably gets collapsed in Berkeleyan idealism. In neutral terms, the *form* of an idea is the representational vehicle itself, understood by early moderns as a mode of thinking or, more broadly, as a kind of intentional mental state. The *object* of an idea is that which the mode of thinking is about.

Distinguishing representational vehicles from contents is not especially controversial in contemporary philosophy of mind. More controversial is the object-oriented version of this distinction in early modern accounts: at least some representational contents are *objects* rather than *abstracta* like propositions. And Leibnizian idealism will need something even more controversial: the objects of at least some representations are wholly *internal* to the idea itself, what I will call *merely representational objects*.[18]

One way to understand merely representational objects again involves a distinctive mode of being. For example, Descartes holds that the internal objects of ideas are real, have a genuine causal structure, and enjoy *objective being*, which is "the way of being [*essendi modus*] by which a thing exists objectively <or representationally> in the intellect by way of an idea" (CSM II/29). When pressed on this ontic status, Descartes famously explains that "the idea of the sun is the sun itself existing in the intellect – not of course formally existing, as it does in the heavens, but objectively existing, i.e., in the way in which objects normally are in the intellect" (CSM II/74).[19] In the Third Meditation, Descartes worries that some things, such as God, have *only* objective

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[16] As with all the *-isms* and *-ians* in this paper, there are substantive interpretative debates about Berkeley's own views. But in a Mendelssohn*ian* (!) spirit, I am interested in outlining forms of idealism that have at least some interpretative plausibility, but I make no effort to establish accuracy nor taxonomical completeness.

[17] Berkeley (2008, 216) uses "regularly co-occurring" to characterize the difference between genuine bodies and hallucinations or mere fictions, whereas Leibniz (1969, 363–364) distinguishes "real" from "imaginary phenomena" in terms of internal coherence, intersubjective agreement, and lawful predictability. In Leibniz's mature metaphysics (*PE* 147; 319), *well-foundedness* is a technical (and much debated) notion about the metaphysical grounding of bodies in the activities of a plurality of finite substances. In what follows, I use "well-founded" in a broader sense to denote non-fictitious representational objects that are appropriately embedded in a causally unified spatiotemporal order.

[18] My label focuses on representations, but one could expand it to a broader class of intentional states, such as what Adams calls "merely intentional objects" (Adams 2021, 39–41). But for reasons that will become clear, I will emphasize the *representationalist* form of Leibniz's idealism against the more Berkeleyan, experientialist version that Adams mostly favors.

[19] Descartes' appeal to normalcy in this debate is more rhetorical than factual, even though this ontology of ideas was not unique to Descartes. For realist readings of some Scholastic predecessors on objective being, see Perler (2001) and Clemenson (2007).

being. On this construal, Leibnizian idealism holds that bodies are among the things with only objective being.

As before, there is an alternative framework that eschews multiple modes of being or kinds of existence in favor of different dependence structures. Let us treat 'exists' and 'is real' as coextensive and as expressing a single, univocal fundamental quantifier whose domain includes mind-dependent objects. On this version, merely representational objects will be existents that are wholly mind-dependent, existing only in virtue of being the objects of representations.[20] So construed, Leibnizian idealism claims that bodies are such merely representational existents, which is how I will treat them in what follows.[21]

Berkeleyan and Leibnizian idealists disagree on more than just the nature and structure of mental states. Recall that Berkeleyan idealism endorses a *constitution* relation between certain mental states and bodies. Leibnizian idealism construes the dependence in non-constitutive *representational* terms. Bodies are not collections of suitably related ideas; they are what certain ideas are about.

It follows on Leibnizian idealism that the mereological structure of bodies need not be mirrored by the structure of the representational vehicles themselves. Indeed, Leibniz motivated his idealism by arguing that mental entities *cannot* share the compositional structure of bodies.[22] On this view, a mind and its states can represent the mereological structure of bodies without themselves being mereologically structured. As we will see, this divergence between represeter and represented structures will be one of the most powerful features of Leibnizian panentheism and monism.

First, let us label the basic combination of Leibnizian idealism and panentheism:

> **Leibnizian panentheism**: everything that exists besides God is wholly in God in virtue of being a well-founded, merely representational object of a divine idea.

This formulation focuses on the dependence of everything on God, but the Leibnizian panentheist will want to say more about relations among those merely representational objects. For instance, we can define a possible world or "world-representation" as a *maximally determinate and internally consistent divine representation* of a single spatiotemporally and causally unified order. We can then define *well-founded* merely representational objects as what are spatiotemporally and causally embedded within such a world-representation.

For now, the general formula will suffice for addressing the worries for panentheism from the previous section. Leibnizian panentheism answers the Specification Worry in terms of representational dependence: everything is wholly *in* God by virtue of being merely an object *of* a divine representation. This, in turn, helps demarcate Leibnizian panentheism from both

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[20] The Leibnizian idealist need not endorse the more permissivist view that every merely representational object exists. On the panentheistic version I develop here, existence will be restricted to *well-founded* representational objects, namely those that are embedded in the spatiotemporal and causal structure of a maximally determinate divine world-representation. Fictional characters like Sherlock Holmes are not so embedded and so do not exist, even if human authors (who, on this theory, are themselves well-founded representational objects) represent them as being in spacetime. I discuss some modal consequences of this view and nearby alternatives in section 5.

[21] Crane (2013) defends a broadly similar view about intentionality. But he denies that intentionality is a real, existent-entailing relation and treats all intentional objects as non-existents. By contrast, on the present Leibnizian view, some merely representational objects do exist, namely the well-founded ones.

[22] This is part of Leibniz's argument (*PE* 213–15) for simple entities capable of having diverse internal states, i.e., monads with mental representations.

traditional monotheism and pantheism. Even traditional monotheists amenable to theories of divine ideas will deny that our world is *merely* the object of a divine representation. And Leibnizian panentheists deny a pantheistic identification of God with the collection of divine representations insofar as they endorse the Cartesian dogma that thought implies a thinker. Hence, any bundle of divine ideas requires the existence of a more metaphysically basic divine *mind* on which they depend. This specification also helps fills out the panentheistic slogan that the world is in God while there is "more" to God than the world. The divine "more" is found in whatever else there is to the divine nature apart from the contents of God's thoughts.[23]

I noted how on Leibnizian idealism, the mereological structure of representations can diverge from the mereological structures they represent. This points to a more general feature of representations in this tradition: minds and ideas can be very unlike what they represent. In slogan form, *representation does not require exemplification*. I cannot be hairy without having hair, but I can represent myself as hairy without having hair. And this is true even if the represented object exists only insofar as it is represented, i.e., if it is a merely representational object.

This divergence allows panentheists to address the Containment Worry, which asked how God can contain various features of our world – limitations, imperfections, moral evils – without directly having or exemplifying those features. The Leibnizian panentheist has a clear and principled answer: God can represent evils, limitations, dependence of wholes on parts without thereby being evil, limited, or dependent on prior parts. God's representation of pain need not be a painful representation.

In other words, divine representations provide a kind of *firewall* between the content of God's representations (including our world, on panentheism) and the rest of God's non-representational nature.

Representational Firewall: God can represent F without being F.[24]

This firewall prevents the contained features of the world from thereby becoming features of God, and the panentheist can explain this in very general terms, without having recourse to ad hoc notions like *eminent containment* or to ontological revisionism like a *privation theory of evil* (Newlands 2016).

This account works especially well if Leibnizian panentheists also reject a traditional constraint on the source of divine representations. On many traditional intellectualist accounts, God's self-representation supplies all the content for God's representations of non-divine possibilities. God populates modal space, as it were, fundamentally through self-reflection. However well-intentioned, that source requirement would reopen all the containment worries that the firewall blocks. For we would then need to explain how, for example, God's own perfect and thorough goodness provides sufficient source material to represent every possible horrendous moral evil.[25] The Leibnizian panentheist can avoid this trap by allowing God's mind

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[23] This also fills in another standard trope among panentheists, namely that the relationship between God and the world is tightly analogous to the relationship between the mind and the body (Ward 2004). This is sometimes expressed in slogan form as "the world is the body of God" (Leidenhag 2020, 65). On Leibnizian panentheism, the world is the body of God in the sense in which, on non-panentheistic Leibnizian idealism (*PE* 221), the human body relates to its mind, namely as a well-founded and especially clear and distinct representational object of special concern.

[24] I borrow this term and framing from Newlands 2022.

[25] For criticisms of historical and contemporary attempts to do exactly that, see Newlands 2013.

to be primitively rich and creative: God can represent possibilities that are wholly unlike God's extra-representational nature. For at least some divine representations and merely representational objects, that's just what God creatively thinks up.

I have focused on why panentheists should find Leibnizian idealism attractive. But panentheism also helps with **traditional worries about idealism**. For example, consider the *coordination* question: whose ideas ground the reality of bodies? The panentheistic answer: God's alone. Or consider the classic question about *unobserved bodies*: what grounds the existence of bodies when no creature perceives them? For the Leibnizian panentheist, the existence of every body is grounded in *God's* representations, not those of finite observers. *Unification*: what unifies all the mental manifold posited by idealism? Answer: a single divine mind with well-founded representations. *Hallucinations/errors*: what constitutes our representational mistakes? Answer: our representational fidelity and well-foundedness are normed by God's authoritative representation of the world.

For all these reasons, I take Leibnizian panentheism to be an especially promising way of fleshing out what Mendelssohn calls the "Spinozist" account of our world. I will now connect this strand of "Spinozism," i.e., Leibnizian panentheism, to contemporary discussions of monism, before turning to some internal problems the view seems to generate.

4. Monism

Whereas contemporary discussions of panentheism and idealism treat these positions as broad families of views, Jonathan Schaffer's groundbreaking work on monism has narrowed the contemporary debate in analytic metaphysics considerably. Schaffer defends *priority monism*, the thesis that, necessarily, there is exactly one fundamental concrete object – the cosmos – of which all other concrete objects are dependent parts (Schaffer 2010, 65).[26] He argues that priority monism is supported by a combination of metaphysical considerations (e.g., the possibility of gunky spacetime), empirical findings (e.g., quantum entanglement and cosmic-level nomic integrity), and common-sense intuitions (e.g., the apparent priority of integrated systems over their parts). Schaffer also claims support for priority monism from prominent historical monists, including Plotinus, Spinoza, Hegel, and Royce.

As usual with groundbreaking work, nearly every aspect of Schaffer's account has since been picked apart and challenged, including its modal strength; its use of grounding, fundamentality, and classical mereology; its alleged fit with metaphysics, physics and common-sense; and its historical ancestry.[27] Rather than pursue any of those threads further, I will highlight a different assumption in Schaffer's account that panentheistic idealism rejects and show how an alternative form of priority monism has advantages for a nearby debate in contemporary panpsychism.

First, consider traditional theism, according to which, necessarily, God is the only fundamental concrete object on which all other existing concrete objects ultimately depend. So

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[26] Schaffer distinguishes priority monism from a more restrictive *existence* monism, according to which only one concrete object exists. (For defense of a view in this vicinity, see Horgan and Potrč (2008).) Michael Della Rocca (2020) defends *strict* monism, the even more restrictive thesis that there are no distinctions at all in reality. Nevertheless, most discussions of monism over the last fifteen years have focused on priority monism.

[27] For a sampling of each, see Siegal (2016) on modal strength; Steinberg (2016) on fundamentality, dependence, and mereology; Bohn (2009) on metaphysical fit; Calosi (2018) on quantum entanglement; Tallent and Baron (2018) on cosmic nomic integrity; deRosset (2010) on common-sense; Guigon (2011) on historical accuracy.

expressed, that sounds similar to the thesis of priority monism. But traditional theists should not be counted as monists simply by definition.[28]

Schaffer's account adds another *differentia*: the relation between the sole fundamental entity and everything else is a *mereological* relation in which everything else is a proper part of the metaphysically prior cosmic whole. Schaffer even claims that the main debate between monism and pluralism turns on the dependence direction of the world's mereological structure: "the debate concerns the correlation between the mereological order of whole and part, and the metaphysical order of prior and posterior" (Schaffer 2010, 38). Since traditional theists deny that the world and its denizens are *parts* of God, theists avoid being counted as priority monists by mere definition.[29]

However, framing priority monism exclusively in mereological terms will misclassify many panentheists. For example, Spinoza is a non-mereological priority monist who denies that the physical world is a *part* of God, even though he thinks it is *in* God (*E* 1p15). Similarly, Leibnizian panentheism holds that the world is in God via representational containment while denying that the world is a part of God in the strict sense of classical mereology. Leibnizian panentheists could even accept Schaffer's core tenets that (a) our world has a well-ordered and complete mereological structure; (b) the principle of unrestricted mereological fusion is true of our world; and (c) the fusion of all our world's proper parts is metaphysically prior to those parts – while still denying that the cosmic fusion is identical with God. Indeed, to affirm such an identity would be to fall back into pantheism.

Hence, it would be helpful to have a broader form of priority monism, one that neither automatically classifies traditional theists as monists nor forces panentheists into pantheism.

> **Scope Worry:** Is there an expanded account of priority monism that counts non-mereological panentheists as priority monists without thereby counting traditional theists as monists?

Happily, our discussion of panentheism already suggests an answer. Call *expanded priority monism* the view that there is a single fundamental concrete object wholly *in which* every other concrete object exists. The asymmetric *in* dependence relation could be satisfied by the dependence of proper parts on their prior whole, so Schaffer's mereological priority monism counts as expanded priority monism. But, as we have seen, there are other salient ways of *being in* that also satisfy the expanded account without trivially including traditional theists.

Admittedly, Schaffer's mereological framing has at least one clear advantage. Classical mereology is very well-behaved and cleanly axiomatized. Mapping metaphysical priority to mereological structure promises a crisp, tractable debate, something historical discussions of monism have often lacked. That promised clarity re-raises the Specification worry for panentheists: if the *in* relation between God and the world is *not* classical parthood, what is it?

This brings us back to the idealist version of panentheism. Recall that, for the Leibnizian panentheist, the *in* relation is *representational containment*: the world is in God insofar as it is a

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[28] For an argument that theists *should* embrace a form of monism, see Segal (2024).

[29] Theists *could* be priority monists if they also hold that the created cosmos is, in fact, mereologically structured in the right ways and metaphysically prior to its parts. But few theists will accept this about the world – not because they reject quantum entanglement et al., but because most theists are not materialists, so they will deny that all created concrete objects are parts of the physical cosmos, even if the physical cosmos is metaphysically prior to its *physical* parts.

well-founded, merely representational object of a maximally determinate and internally consistent divine idea. Although God's idea can represent the world's mereological structure, representation relations are not themselves parthood relations. In early modern terminology, representational objects are not *parts* of ideas, and ideas are not *parts* of minds. Nevertheless, merely representational objects depend on and exist in ideas, and ideas depend on and exist in the representing mind. Hence Leibnizian panentheism constitutes a non-mereological form of expanded priority monism.

In fact, contra Schaffer's framing of the debate, Leibnizian idealism cleanly separates mereology from dependence. That the universe is a merely representational object of a divine idea determines nothing about its internal mereological structure. Leibnizian panentheists can therefore affirm expanded priority monism while being monists, pluralists, or even nihilists about the world's mereological structure. On Leibnizian panentheism, monism is about the world's dependence on God, not its internal compositional structure.

For similar reasons, Leibnizian panentheists can sidestep a family of worries facing idealism that will be familiar from panpsychism debates. Panpsychists generally hold that fundamental physical entities have mental states, which are usually taken to be experiential (or proto-experiential) states.[30] As with disputes between mereological priority monists and pluralists, panpsychists disagree among themselves about the direction of fundamentality. Bottom-up, *micropsychist* views, such as Russellian constitutive panpsychism, hold that micro-experiences are the categorical bases of microphysical properties and together compose our macro-experiences.[31] Such views face a *combination* problem: how do micro-experiences (and perhaps micro-subjects) combine to yield a single unified macro-subject like us? Alternatively, top-down, monistic panpsychist views, such as constitutive cosmopsychism, make the cosmos the sole fundamental subject. They face the *decomposition* problem: how is a plurality of unified finite subjects individuated from the one cosmic subject? These problems arise insofar as panpsychism tries to map the structure of experiences directly onto the world's basic physical structure.

Chalmers argues that idealism faces parallel structural concerns (Chalmers 2017). On some bottom-up forms of idealism, micro-level mental states ground microphysical states, raising questions about how their micro-structures could determine macro-level physical structures. Alternatively, according to a top-down, cosmic idealism, a single cosmic mental reality grounds the physical, raising questions about how that cosmic mental structure is carved up into more localized physical structures. More generally, such forms of idealism face a structuring worry:

> **Structuring Worry**: how can the structure of ideas determine the structure of the physical world?

Idealist structuring worries and panpsychist combination/decomposition problems are most pressing when the mental-physical relation is taken to be *constitutive*, as in Berkeleyan idealism and Russellian constitutive panpsychism. Phenomenal mental states, especially Berkeleyan

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[30] For what has become the canonical taxonomy and discussion of contemporary panpsychisms, see Chalmers 2017a, 2017b.

[31] For a physicalist version of panentheism on which some of God's mental properties realize the microphysical, see Gillett 2003. But Gillett's worries about the loss of higher-level efficacy presuppose a realization relation between God and the microphysical world that the Leibnizian representational account denies.

experiential states, do not seem to exhibit the compositional and mereological structures characteristic of physical entities.

But recall that Leibnizian idealism denies that ideas constitute bodies. Rather, bodies depend *representationally* on ideas, which permits sharp divergence between the structure of ideas and the structures of what they represent. Hence Leibnizian idealists can sidestep combination/decomposition problems and structuring worries for the same reason they can stay neutral on mereological priority. Representational dependence does not require structural isomorphism or even structural similarity between relata.[32]

Avoiding problems in metaphysics is good; doing so through ad hoc agnosticism would be less virtuous. But as we already saw with the Representational Firewall, representational dependence generally permits divergence between representational form and represented content, and that divergence is what allows the Leibnizian panentheist to sidestep problems facing cosmopsychism and constitutive idealism in a principled way. Panentheists could certainly hold additional views about the direction of the world's mereological priority or the intrinsic character of the physical, but those commitments are purposefully not entailed by Leibnizian panentheism itself.

5. <u>Trouble in Panentheistic Paradise</u>

I have emphasized the unique benefits of combining panentheism with Leibnizian idealism, ignoring more familiar explanatory advantages stemming from the theism itself. I have said little of potential costs, including those also stemming from the theism, nor of potential concerns with the requisite machinery, such as the internalist, object-oriented account of mental representation. I will close by raising two more internal worries that bring us back to Mendelssohn's account and again highlight the distinctive strengths of Leibnizian panentheism.

The first worry concerns whether the Leibnizian panentheist can draw a sufficient and principled distinction between actuality and mere possibility, supposing that every world is "found in the divine intellect alone" (*PW* 108). The second concerns whether merely representational objects can be genuine subjects of experience.

Modal Worry: In virtue of what is the actual world not merely possible?

Subjectivity Worry: Are there genuine subjects of experience in a world of merely representational objects?

Of the many possible ways of addressing the Modal Worry, I will set aside us those that move too far from the core of Leibnizian panentheism, such as denying that there are any alternative possibilities in the first place (a response Spinoza himself might have given). Instead, I will focus on two broad families of responses. The first defends a robustly *actualist* form of panentheism; the second tries to distinguish the actual from the merely possible within a form of panentheistic *possibilism*.

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[32] Leibnizian panentheists also avoid what Chalmers calls "the austerity problem" for idealists (Chalmers 2017, 26). If the mind constituting the cosmos must closely mirror the structure and dynamics of fundamental physics, it will be too thin to count as having a rich mental life. But on the non-constitutive Leibnizian view, the divine mind can bear other cognitive, evaluative, and normative attitudes toward its representations of fundamental physics.

According to actualism, only the actual world and its denizens exist. The best way to maintain actualism within Leibnizian panentheism involves distinguishing among the *contents* of God's representations and arguing that only God's representation of the actual world is well-founded. For example, in his explicitly actualist and more Berkeleyan version of panentheism, Robert Merrihew Adams argues that God neither needs nor has the requisite mental cognitions to ground the reality of fully determinate, non-actual worlds (Adams 2021, 194–212). Instead, God represents non-actual possibilities in incomplete ways, as "fragments of lives of non-actual creatures" (Adams 2021, 210). If so, then God represents only one spatiotemporally and causally unified order in full specificity – the actual world – and divine representations of non-actual possibilities are not well-founded, and so their objects do not exist. In essence, this approach retains actualism by restricting the scope of divine representations.[33]

On the actualist approach, only one spatiotemporal and causally unified order is represented with full specificity. By contrast, I have followed Leibniz in assuming that God represents a plurality of possible worlds in maximally determinate ways. I have also assumed, again with Leibniz, that God gives reality to the objects of all such well-founded world-representations by virtue of doing so (Newlands 2013). Contra Leibniz, I have treated existence and reality as co-extensive, which leads Leibnizian panentheists to a form of possibilism, according to which non-actual possible worlds and their denizens exist, albeit as wholly mind-dependent entities.[34]

To answer the Modal Worry within this possibilist framework, Leibnizian panentheists could focus less on the *contents* of God's representations and more on God's *relation* to those contents. For example, Mendelssohn notes that on orthodox Leibnizianism, God prefers one possible world over all others prior to creating it. A Leibnizian panentheist might adopt a similar strategy by holding that God takes a unique delight in our world, thereby distinguishing it from the merely possible ones. On this account, God continues to ground the reality of every possible world by representing it, but makes our world actual by virtue of bearing a unique, additional conative attitude toward its representation, such as *most favored*. This preserves panentheism, since divine favoring is just another immanent mental attitude within God's mind that does not add any new content to the favored representation.

Still, a panentheist might want a more robust ground for actuality than mere divine favoring. She might appeal instead to more robust immanent mental attitudes, such as a heightened divine *attention* to the representation of our world or a non-experiential, immanent *processing* of our world's internal dynamics in a discursive, step-wise sequence.[35] But she must be careful here, lest the actuality-making attitude turn God into a subject of the representation in ways that violate the Representational Firewall and re-raise Containment worries.

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[33] The Leibnizian panentheist denies that God must be a conscious subject of all qualitative possibilities in the way Adams's more Berkeleyan version requires, thereby undercutting some of the motivations of Adams's restrictions. One could even agree with Adams (2021, 208-210) that God does not need fully detailed representations of modal space in order to select or govern the actual world, but still hold that divine *creativity* would be a sufficient motivation for God to represent modal space in full detail.

[34] According to Leibniz, "there are some things that are possible…and which do not really exist" (*PE* 20). Of course, Leibniz himself also rejects panentheism, so his actualism is grounded in the existence of things outside the divine mind, which he thinks merely possible things do not enjoy.

[35] This distinction also offers a response to panentheists concerned that Leibnizian ontology implies a divine heavy-handedness incompatible with relational openness. One can contrast simply knowing the contents of every book in a library with the distinct act of selectively attending to a particular volume, processing it in a page-by-page manner.

For any of these attitudinal accounts, one might wonder why God does not bear the relevant mental attitude toward more than one world-representation.[36] Indeed, one might think the deeper force of the Modal Worry is that all worlds have the same ontic status, regardless of any divine attitude towards them. If so, a more deflationary semantic option becomes available. Following David Lewis, the Leibnizian panentheist could hold that 'actually' is an indexical operator (like 'now'), whose evaluation is fixed by the representation in which the utterance occurs. On the panentheist version, 'actually *p*' is true iff *p* is true in the maximally specific divine representation that contains that token of 'actually.' This answer is metaphysically modest: there is no further metaphysical property or divine act that makes a world actual.[37] Rather, the token of 'actually' simply picks out the very divine representation in which the Modal Worry itself is raised.[38]

On either the actualist or any of the possibilist responses to the Modal Worry, the Leibnizian panentheist is committed to the view that the denizens of our world are merely representational objects in the mind of God. This can make it sound like we are merely characters in a book in God's mind – perhaps in God's favorite volume among the infinitely many complete books in the divine library. But characters in our books seem to lack any subjective, phenomenally rich awareness. Although we can represent Sherlock Holmes as pondering, there is no genuine *what-its-like* to being Sherlock Holmes. More generally, if Leibnizian panentheism rejects finite substances, must it also dispense with finite subjects?

Once again, there are various responses available to our Leibnizian panentheist, ranging from deflationary accounts of selfhood (e.g., narrative theories (Schechtman 1996)) to accounts of consciousness especially apt for realization within a representational space (e.g., Global Workspace Theory (Baars 1988) or Integrated Information Theory (Tononi 2008)).

Rather than pursuing anything like those replies, I will argue instead that the Leibnizian panentheist is under no special burden here. The reason is that differences in the *ultimate* metaphysical ground of our world do not by themselves threaten subjectivity, so long as the more proximate ground of consciousness remains. To illustrate this, suppose a materialist, mereological priority monist solves the hard problem of consciousness by showing how a complex set of facts about localized spacetime realizes consciousness. A philosophical celebration ensues.

However, suppose it is later definitively proven that spacetime itself is non-fundamental because it emerges from quantum gravity, or because it is being digitally simulated by aliens, or because it is representationally grounded in a divine idea. That discovery would falsify the priority monism, but insofar as those localized facts about spacetime structures still obtain and do in fact realize and explain consciousness, we should not conclude that the celebrated solution

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[36] This is analogous to a question facing more traditional theistic accounts of creation, namely why an infinitely resourceful God created only one world. Leibniz's general answer, roughly that God had sufficient reason to bring about only the best spatiotemporally unified world, is available to the Leibnizian panentheist as well.

[37] Lewis couples his modal semantics with modal realism, the view that there are non-actual concrete worlds (Lewis 1986). On at least some ways of counting, such as by fundamental entities, the panentheistic version is less ontologically costly than Lewis's, since the plurality of worlds are the plentiful objects of representations in a single divine mind rather than a plurality of fundamental, causally isolated spacetime structures. (For more on this way of counting and others, see Schaffer 2015 and Newlands 2021.)

[38] While traditional theism struggles with actual evils, the possibilist Leibnizian panentheist faces the vaster scope of all *possible* evils. Yet some theistic defenses might be extended. For instance, Marilyn Adams's horror-defeat account could imply "omni-modal-benevolence," according to which God ultimately defeats horrors for participants in *every* world. However, this suggests either that undefeated horrors are strictly *impossible* or that standard Kripkean semantics cannot adequately model the gratuity of divine defeat.

to the hard problem has been lost. For that explanatory dependence to change, the realization or grounding relations among the non-fundamentals would themselves need to change. But altering what ultimately grounds those non-fundamentals need not, by itself, induce changes among the non-fundamentals (though of course it could, depending on the details).

The Leibnizian panentheist holds that there is a more fundamental level beyond whatever the materialist takes to be fundamental. That is a substantive dispute, but its resolution is unlikely to undermine the reality or grounding role of whatever more immediately and locally realizes consciousness. At the very least, it would be surprising if the true answer to the hard problem of consciousness depended on, say, spacetime itself being ultimately fundamental.

This just reapplies an advantage of Leibnizian panentheism that we have already encountered. Just as the truth of Leibnizian panentheism by itself neither alters our world's mereological structure nor imports constitutive divine states into it, so too it leaves untouched whatever one takes to be the more proximate grounds of finite subjectivity and consciousness.[39] This again allows the Leibnizian panentheist to be a principled agnostic about those grounds, though she could consistently hold additional views about, e.g., solving the hard problem.

In general, Leibnizian panentheism is not proposing to *eliminate* any internal aspects of the world to which we are committed by science and reflection. Here is where the analogy with fiction breaks down.[40] The fictional world of Sherlock Holmes is highly incomplete and indeterminate. By contrast, a *world* on Leibnizian panentheism is maximally specific and dynamically complete. In the terms of section three, worlds are the objects of *well-founded* divine representations, in virtue of which they are not merely fictions or hallucinations. Hence, whatever within our world is responsible for subjects of experience like us will be included among the full contents of God's world-representation.

If that still seems unsatisfying, I suspect it is because there is a lingering suspicion that merely representational objects, however complex, are not genuinely real. The Leibnizian idealist *says* that bodies are grounded in well-founded representations and are thereby real and causally situated in space and time. The suspicion is that such bodies are only *represented* as causally situated. Likewise, the Leibnizian panentheist *says* that the world's internal structure remains untouched by her theory. The suspicion is that there is no real internal structure at all if the world is merely a representational object.

However, this is no longer an objection from subjectivity; it is a challenge to the idealism itself. And, as I noted at the outset, I have not tried to defend the truth of Leibnizian idealism, panentheism, or expanded priority monism. I have argued that their combination is internally coherent and that each supplies valuable theoretical resources to the others. Panentheism answers the Specification and Containment worries via Leibnizian idealism; idealists can address longstanding questions and sidestep more recent structural worries by adopting a panentheistic

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[39] Advocates of dualism might object that consciousness requires fundamental finite mental substances or fundamental phenomenal properties. But these objections impose especially strong commitments on dualism. The claim that finite minds must be fundamental would rule out any divine grounding (as opposed to a more modest thesis that minds cannot be grounded in *physical* substances). And the corresponding form of property dualism would imply that phenomenal properties are *essentially* ungrounded (rather than the more familiar claim that they cannot be grounded in *physical* properties). Since Leibnizian panentheism posits a *divine mental* rather than *finite material* ultimate ground for the world, it is compatible with standard anti-physicalist forms of dualism.

[40] For an explicitly divine fictionalist model, see Lebens (2015; 2017). Rather than adopt an idealist ontology of merely representational objects, Lebens offers a fictionalist semantics according to which statements about our world, including about our subjectivity, are not true *simpliciter*, but are true according to the fiction of God's story of our world.

monism; and priority monism can gain a suitably general framework and additional explanatory resources by embracing panentheism. If we still wish to reject all three, let it be based on appropriately targeted objections.

Returning to our original guide: Mendelssohn himself was no Spinozist, though he conceded that Spinoza's "dangerous errors…have contributed to the priority of truth" (PW 111) and that "without him, philosophy would never have been able to extend its borders so far" (PW 106). I have tried to give a fuller sense of what that philosophical hinterland might look like in the form of Leibnizian panentheism. Those antecedently open to at least one of its commitments – panentheism, idealism, expanded priority monism – might find themselves at home among the rest.[*]

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