Leibniz on Divine Concurrence

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Abstract

In this paper I examine G. W. Leibniz’s view on the debate between occasionalists, mere conservationists, and concurrentists. Although commentators agree that Leibniz wants to reject occasionalism and mere conservationism, there is considerable disagreement about whether Leibniz is committed to a theory of divine concurrence that differs from occasionalism and mere conservationism in principled ways. I critically assess three interpretations of Leibniz’s theory in this paper. The first two (those of Robert Adams and Sukjae Lee) differ with respect to important details, but they both assume that Leibniz straightforwardly affirms the continual creation doctrine. I argue that a coherent Leibnizian theory of divine concurrence cannot be constructed on the ontological framework that the continual creation doctrine provides. The third interpretation that I consider holds that Leibniz is willing to affirm the continual creation doctrine only to the extent that it provides an acceptable way of characterizing the dependence of finite substances on God at the level of appearances. It is suggested that Leibniz’s deep metaphysical view of creation and conservation is that in a single act God creates and conserves substances that are non-spatial and atemporal at the deepest level of metaphysical rigor. I argue that this alternative account of creation and conservation provides a promising ontological framework that can support a coherent theory of creaturely activity that does not collapse into occasionalism or mere conservationism.

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One of the major challenges for theistic philosophers in the medieval and early modern periods was to provide an account of God’s activity in the ordinary course of nature. It was widely agreed that God created the world *ex nihilo* and conserved it in its continued existence, but there was significant disagreement about the relation between divine conservation and the causal activity of finite substances. Three general theories about this relation were typically distinguished: occasionalism, mere conservationism, and concurrentism. Occasionalists held that God was the only genuine causal agent. They were thus committed to a very strong conception of conservation, frequently characterizing it as continued divine creation. Mere conservationists, in contrast, recognized causal powers in both God and finite substances. They characterized finite substances as the *immediate* causes of particular effects produced within the ordinary course of nature, insisting that God is only the *mediate* cause of such effects in virtue of conserving finite substances along with their active and passive powers. The third theory, concurrentism, attempted to carve out a middle ground between the other two theories. Concurrentists agreed with mere conservationists that finite substances possess causal powers, but they insisted that both creatures and God were immediate causes of particular effects within the ordinary course of nature. Without an immediate causal contribution on the part of God, creatures would be incapable of acting. In other words, God not only conserved the active and passive powers of finite substances, he also concurred with them in the production of particular effects. As one might expect, the precise nature of divine concurrence was a
matter of much dispute. Critics of divine concurrence charged its adherents with failing to provide a satisfactory explanation of the theory, often insisting that there simply is no logical space between occasionalism and mere conservationism.\textsuperscript{7}

G. W. Leibniz’s take on the debate between occasionalists, mere conservationists, and concurrentists is fascinating, and it has received a fair amount of attention in the recent secondary literature.\textsuperscript{8} This much about Leibniz’s position is uncontroversial: he explicitly endorses concurrence in a number of texts, and he is a vehement critic of the other two theories. Like most philosophers and theologians of his day he criticizes mere conservationism for not sufficiently respecting the utter dependence of creatures on God.\textsuperscript{9} His criticisms of occasionalism are even more scathing. Insisting that a creature ‘which does not act…can in no way be a substance,’ Leibniz claims that occasionalism threatens to make ‘created things disappear into mere modifications of the one divine substance’ (G 4:515; AG:165). In other words, occasionalism threatens to collapse into Spinozistic substance monism.\textsuperscript{10}

Although it is clear that Leibniz wants to reject occasionalism and mere conservationism, recent commentators have found it difficult to understand the precise structure of his positive causal theory. Indeed, some of Leibniz’s remarks on creaturely activity have been taken to bear a striking resemblance to mere conservationism, while others have appeared to veer dangerously close to occasionalism.\textsuperscript{11} This gives rise to an important interpretive question: does Leibniz locate a coherent causal theory that occupies a middle ground between mere conservationism and occasionalism, or does he merely shift back and forth between these two positions?

In this paper I shall explain and critically assess three interpretations of Leibniz’s theory of divine concurrence that attempt to show that it is coherent and differs from mere conservationism and occasionalism in principled ways.\textsuperscript{12} The first two interpretations are those of Robert Adams and Sukjae Lee. Their interpretations differ with respect to important details, but they both assume that Leibniz (at least relatively) straightforwardly affirms the continual creation doctrine. I shall argue, however, that a coherent Leibnizian theory of creaturely activity cannot be constructed on the ontological framework that the continual creation doctrine provides. The third interpretation that I consider has not been set forth in the secondary literature to date, though it does build on important insights from other Leibniz commentators (particularly Jaques Jalabert and Robert Sleigh). According to this alternative interpretation Leibniz does not straightforwardly affirm the continual creation doctrine. He is willing to affirm the doctrine only to the extent that it provides an acceptable way of characterizing the dependence of creatures on God at the level of appearances. I shall suggest that his deep metaphysical view of creation and conservation is different: in a single act God creates and conserves substances that are non-spatial and atemporal at the deepest level of metaphysical rigor. The third interpretation of Leibniz’s account of divine concurrence attempts to show that this alternative ontological framework can support a coherent theory of creaturely activity that does not collapse into occasionalism or mere conservatism. I shall argue that the third interpretation is promising and deserves further consideration.

Before we can proceed to these three interpretations some background must be provided on Leibniz’s views on causation. This will help us to appreciate the constraints that a satisfactory interpretation of Leibniz’s theory of divine concurrence must meet. In his mature metaphysics Leibniz is committed to an ontology of immaterial mind-like substances, which he calls ‘monads.’\textsuperscript{13} He famously denies that there is any genuine causal interaction between finite substances; but he does think that there is a kind of causation
that occurs \textit{within} each finite substance. This account of internal or intra-substantial causation incorporates the following three causal theses:

CT1: Each substance involves a nature/internal force/law of the series.\textsuperscript{14}

CT2: All of the modifications/states of a substance arise from its own depths.\textsuperscript{15}

CT3: Any state of a substance is a consequence of its preceding state/states.\textsuperscript{16}

CT1-CT3 are typically interpreted roughly along the following lines. God creates a substance in an initial state, endowing it with an internal force and a developmental law. The substance’s internal force then generates its next (total temporary) state in accordance with the developmental law. The substance then generates another state in accordance with its law, and so on, \textit{ad infinitum}. The duration of a substance is thus thought to consist in an ordered series of causally related states. These states are perceptual, and are spoken of as the ‘modifications’ of a substance.\textsuperscript{17}

In explaining Leibniz’s account of intra-substantial causation, commentators often focus primarily on CT1-CT3. Viewed from this perspective, it seems easy to distinguish Leibniz’s theory from occasionalism. Given that each substance is the bearer of causal powers sufficient to generate a series of perceptual states, the gulf separating Leibniz’s theory from occasionalism appears to be far and wide. Indeed, one might initially think that CT1-CT3 would cohere best with a version of mere conservatism.

Leibniz’s remarks on divine conservation make it clear that this is not, in fact, the case. Consider the following two causal theses that Leibniz affirms in a wide range of important texts:

CT4: Everything positive in creatures is produced immediately by the divine will.\textsuperscript{18}

CT5: There are no two times at which the dependence of creatures on God is different.\textsuperscript{19}

CT4 and CT5 express the core of Leibniz’s view on divine conservation. His commitment to these theses leads him to affirm the doctrine of continual creation. This comes out clearly in the following remarks from the \textit{Theodicy}:

The creature depends continually upon divine operation, and...it depends upon that no less after the time of its beginning than when it first begins...Now there is no reason why this conserving action should not be called production, and even creation (T:385).

Affirmations of the continual creation doctrine can be found in a number of other important texts such as the \textit{New System of Nature} and the \textit{Monadology}. In the former text he claims that ‘all things, with all their reality, are continually produced by the power of God’ (G 4:483; AG:143). Similarly, in the latter text he writes: ‘all created or derivative monads are products, and are generated, so to speak, by continual fulgurations of the divinity from moment to moment’ (G 6:614; AG:219).

It is not difficult to see that CT4, CT5, and the doctrine of continual creation seem to be in tension with CT1-CT3. If finite substances are literally being recreated by God at every instant, how can this leave any room for the purported causal activity of finite substances? One can certainly sympathize with commentators who see CT4-5 as leaning in the direction of occasionalism, and CT1-3 as leaning in the direction of mere-conservatism.\textsuperscript{20} Is it possible to see all of these theses as complimentary aspects of a unified theory of divine concurrence?

Let us now turn to the interpretations of Leibniz’s account of divine concurrence that have been set forth by Robert Adams and Sukjae Lee. I begin by quoting the central text
that Adams and Lee appeal to in developing their interpretations. The passage is taken from the *Theodicy*:

[a] Suppose [supposons] that the creature is produced anew at each instant; let us grant [accordons] also that the instant excludes all priority of time, being indivisible; but let us point out that it does not exclude priority of nature, or what is called anteriority in signo rationis, and that this is sufficient. The production, or action whereby God produces, is anterior by nature to the existence of the creature that is produced; the creature taken in itself, with its nature and its necessary properties, is anterior to its accidental affections and to its actions; and yet all these things are in being in the same moment. [b] God produces the creature in conformity with the demand [exigence] of the preceding instants, following the laws of his wisdom; and the creature operates in conformity with that nature that he conveys to it in creating it always. The limitations and imperfections arise therein through the nature of the subject, which sets bounds to God’s production; this is the consequence of the original imperfection of creatures (T:388).

I have distinguished two sub-passages within this text because Adams’ interpretation emphasizes [a], while Lee’s interpretation appeals to [b]. Let us consider Adams’ account first. Adams reads [a] as presenting an account of intra-substantial causation according to which the cause is always simultaneous with the effect. The key to this account is the distinction between the nature of a substance and a substance’s ‘accidental affections.’ Although the substance’s nature and (certain of) its accidental affections are produced by God at a single instant, the nature (or primitive force) is ‘prior by nature’ to the accidental affections. Adams suggests that this allows Leibniz to hold that what God produces is ‘the creature’s nature ‘operating’ and thus producing its affections and actions’ (1994:97; emphasis Adams). Although ‘God’s conserving activity has a direct causal relation to the creature’s actions’ it does not exclude ‘the productive agency of the created nature’ (1994:98)

Adams’ interpretations of CT1-CT3 differ significantly from standard interpretations of Leibniz’s account of intra-substantial causation (which often do not attempt to incorporate Leibniz’s views on divine conservation). The farthest deviation from standard accounts comes in the case of CT3, which is typically taken to imply that there is a ‘metaphysically real’ influence between the successive states of a substance. This sort of causation is ruled out on Adams’ picture. Given that the substance is literally recreated by God at \(t_1\), \(t_2\), etc., the total state of a monad at \(t_1\) cannot be the cause of the total state of a monad at \(t_2\). Genuine intra-substantial causation consists only in the substance’s primitive force instantaneously producing the substance’s accidental affections at each successive instant. This is the sense in which a substance’s modifications can be said to arise from its own depths (CT2). Adams gives a reductive reading of CT3 by suggesting that ‘the causally efficacious action of the forces of a created substance is always simultaneous with its effect, but…it produces the effect, in accordance with the relevant laws, in view of the substance’s previous states’ (1994:98; emphasis Adams). It is only in this significantly less robust sense that a substance’s perceptual states are consequences of its preceding states.

The account that Adams attributes to Leibniz satisfies all the formal requirements for a theory of divine concurrence. It allows Leibniz to claim that effects within the ordinary course of nature are immediately caused by God and finite substances. The accidental modifications of a substance at an instant, for example, are produced immediately by the substance’s nature and they are produced immediately by God in virtue of his creation of the substance (its nature and its accidental modifications) at that very instant. Leibniz can thus claim that everything positive in creatures is a direct result of the divine will (CT4), and that there are no two times at which the dependence of creatures on God is different (CT5).
Most of the criticisms that can be leveled against Adams’ interpretation can also be leveled against Lee’s interpretation, so I shall not mention them until Lee’s interpretation has been introduced. By way of transition, however, let me note that it does not seem plausible to suppose that a substance’s primitive force that is created at an instant could, in that very same instant, produce its accidental affections – particularly if those very same affections are created by God. The deeper issue in play here is whether the notion of instantaneous existence is even compatible with Leibniz’s deep metaphysics. I do not think that it is, but I shall not press the point just yet.

Let us now turn to the central features of Lee’s interpretation. Like Adams, Lee takes Leibniz to be straightforwardly committed to the continual creation doctrine. But unlike Adams, Lee takes this commitment to preclude any ‘productive activity’ on the part of created substances. Lee is fully aware that such a claim can appear to place Leibniz a hair’s breadth from occasionalism. However, he argues that there is still room for Leibnizian substances to concur with God in the production of effects within the ordinary course of nature. Lee does not discuss Leibniz’s remarks in sub-passage [a], focusing instead on the remarks in [b], particularly the claim that ‘God produces the creature in conformity with the exigency of the preceding instants,’ and the claim that the nature of the creature ‘sets bounds to God’s production.’ Lee suggests that the nature of a creature sets bounds to God’s production by providing the reasons for God’s choice to create each of the substance’s successive states.

There are two senses in which a substance’s nature provides reasons for God’s productive activity. First, the substance’s nature – considered at any one state – expresses (or represents) the substance’s future states. By specifying the next state that God will produce, the substance can be said to determine its subsequent state. Lee describes this determination as a kind of formal causation. The nature of a substance also presents the ‘goodness or value’ of its subsequent state ‘as a reason for God to bring it into existence over others’ (2004:223). By presenting this value the present state of a substance can be said to demand its subsequent state. In other words, the present state of a substance motivates God to produce its subsequent state. Lee describes this as a kind of final causation. Finite substances can thus be said to concur with God in the production of their successive states by serving as the formal and final causes of the states that God creates.

The interpretations provided by Adams and Lee diverge on several important issues. They appear to agree, however, on two fundamental points: first, that Leibniz takes the continual creation doctrine to provide a metaphysically rigorous account of God’s conservation of finite substances, and second, that such a commitment would be non-problematic within the context of a Leibnizian metaphysic. Both of these points, I believe, are incorrect.

Serious problems emerge if one considers Leibniz’s views on the so-called ‘labyrinth of the continuum.’ This labyrinth, which Leibniz describes as one of the two ‘famous labyrinths where our reason very often goes astray,’ engages the question of whether continuous quantities can be composed out of simple elements (e.g., whether a line be composed of points) (T:53). In his analysis of the labyrinth of the continuum Leibniz denies that there can be any such composition in continuous quantities. Consider one of his frequent examples of a continuous quantity: time. Leibniz characterizes time as an ideal quantity – not as something actual or real – and he claims that it is not composed out of instants. Instants are merely the ‘termini’ or ‘endpoints’ of specified temporal intervals. The construal of instants as mere ‘endpoints’ strongly suggests that an instantaneous perceptual state could only be an idealization—not something actual or real. In other words, Leibniz’s views on continuity imply that an instantaneous state would be a mere
To say that this conclusion does not sit well with the instantaneous account of continual creation that Adams and Lee attribute to Leibniz would be an understatement, for a straightforward commitment to that ontological framework would reduce the series of states constitutive of a monad’s duration to a series of mere nothings (which could not, of course, add up to anything at all).

Even if one were to suppose, for the sake of argument, that the problem concerning instantaneous existence could be overcome, one would still be faced with Leibniz’s assertion that a continuous quantity cannot be composed out of simple elements. This implies that if the duration of a substance were composed out of a series of instantaneous perceptual states, then the duration of a substance would have to be discontinuous. To draw such a conclusion would be to affirm that substances do not endure, strictly speaking, beyond an instant. But the notion of a substance that does not endure is a contradiction in Leibnizian terms. The general conclusion to be drawn here, I believe, is that a literal commitment to an instantaneous account of continual creation would severely compromise the coherence of Leibniz’s theory of finite substance.

It is not entirely surprising that Adams and Lee take Leibniz to be committed to an instantaneous account of the continual creation doctrine, for they base their interpretations largely on §388 of the *Theodicy*, which does display an account of divine conservation that is in keeping with such a view. There are, however, strong reasons for concluding that Leibniz is not speaking in metaphysical rigor in that text. This will become clear if we consider the broader context of the passage.

§388 is embedded within a discussion of divine conservation as it relates to the problem of evil. In §381 Leibniz distinguishes the mere conservationist conception of conservation from that of Pierre Bayle who ‘goes so far as to deny action to creatures.’ Leibniz notes in the following section that in arguing for this conclusion Bayle places a very heavy emphasis on the doctrine ‘accepted of the schoolmen, that conservation is a continued creation’ (T:382). The conclusion that seems to follow from this doctrine, Leibniz claims, is ‘that the creature never exists, that it is ever new-born and ever dying, like time, movement and other transient beings’ (T:382). If Leibniz’s considered view on the ontological status of instantaneous states is the one suggested earlier, then it is not surprising to see him claiming that the continual creation doctrine seems to imply that creatures never exist.

Given the radical – and presumably unacceptable – ontological implications that appear to follow from the continual creation doctrine, it is important to submit this doctrine to a rigorous philosophical analysis. Leibniz explains what one would need to do in order to provide such an analysis in §383 and §384. First, one would need to determine whether an analysis of the duration of creatures implies that those creatures are re-created at every instant. Leibniz takes the Cartesians and Erhard Weigel (one of his former professors) to affirm different versions of this basic argument, which presupposes a commitment to temporal atomism. He rejects the Cartesian argument and expresses serious doubts about the cogency of Weigel’s argument. Leibniz concludes his brief discussion of Weigel’s argument with these telling remarks:

The difficulties on the composition of the continuum enter also into this matter. This dogma [continual creation] appears to resolve time into moments, whereas others regard moments and points as mere modalities of the continuum, that is, as extremities of the parts that can be assigned to it, and not as constituent parts. But this is not the place for entering into that labyrinth (T:384; emphasis added).

This text makes it clear that Leibniz does not provide a metaphysically rigorous analysis of the continual creation doctrine in the *Theodicy*. In order to do that one must engage the labyrinth of the continuum, which Leibniz explicitly brackets in the present context.
Leibniz proceeds to explain ‘what can be said for certain on the present subject,’ namely ‘that the creature depends continually upon divine operation, and that it depends upon that no less after the time of its beginning than when it first begins’ (T:385). It is no accident, I would suggest, that this description of the continual creation doctrine makes no reference to instantaneous states.

We are now well placed to understand what is going on in §388 of the *Theodicy*. Leibniz does provide a description of continual creation in this section that makes reference to instantaneous states, but he is careful to preface this description with a highly significant qualification: ‘Suppose that the creature is produced anew at each instant’ (T:388; emphasis added). The instantaneous account of creation is set forth as a supposition. And why is he presenting the account as a supposition? It is because Bayle assumed such a view in his argument that continual creation did not allow for the causal activity of finite substances. Leibniz does not provide a fully rigorous response to Bayle in the *Theodicy*, for that would require a rigorous analysis of the continual creation doctrine. But Leibniz still needs to say something in response to Bayle. This is precisely what he does in §388. He explains how one might defend the causal activity of finite substances on the supposition that God literally re-creates the world at every instant. Leibniz is willing to assume such an account of creation in the context of a popular discussion of Bayle’s critique of secondary causality, but it is not a position that has a place in Leibniz’s deep metaphysics.31

The texts we have considered suggest that Leibniz does not present a metaphysically rigorous account of divine concurrence in the *Theodicy*. What then is his considered view? In the remainder of this paper I shall sketch an answer to this question. I begin with an interpretation of CT1-CT3. This will lead us to an alternative ontological framework from which to consider Leibniz’s views on creation, conservation, and concurrence.33

CT1 is ambiguous. It states that each substance involves a nature/primitive force/law of the series, but it does not specify the ontological relation between the nature, the force, the law, and the substance. However, a number of textual and philosophical considerations suggest that Leibniz strictly identified the nature of a substance with its primitive force, the law of the series, and with the substance itself. In other words, the substance just is a nature/force/law.34

Having disambiguated CT1, we can proceed to an analysis of CT2. The first thing to say here is that Leibniz does not flesh out the details of this aspect of his theory of causation (as a number of commentators have noted). He does, however, characterize successive states as limitations, and he says that substances produce modifications by changes in their limits.35 Here is one way (admittedly an extrapolation from the texts) to understand these suggestive claims. A substance individuates a state by reflectively specifying temporal boundaries for an interval of its duration—boundaries that consist in the preceding and succeeding states of the interval in question.36 By bounding or limiting the initial interval these states make it determinate. This would not make the initial state completely determinate, however, for complete determination could only be attained if the states that limit the initial interval were themselves determinate. This means that the states bounding the intervals that determine the initial interval must also be specified. But then the states bounding the intervals that determine the intervals that determine the initial interval must also be specified, and so on, ad infinitum. This suggests that a state is individuated to the extent that the series of states that bound it are specified, but that no state is ever rigorously individuated as this would require, per impossible, the specification of an infinite series of states.

The regress of determination involved in the individuation of monadic states implies that the monad as a completely determinate and non-aggregated whole is ontologically and conceptually prior to its reflectively specified successive states. It is conceptually prior
because the only way to conceive a state is by conceiving it as a limitation of the prior whole. It is ontologically prior because if the monad did not exist as a determinate whole it would not be possible to reflectively specify a state or a series of states. According to this analysis, any state that is reflectively specified ‘follows from’ the substance (or, equivalently, it ‘follows from the substance’s nature or primitive force’), and all of a substance’s modifications can be said to arise from its own depths (CT2).

This analysis explains the sense in which each state of a substance is caused by the substance itself. But Leibniz also speaks of each state of a monad as being caused by its preceding state. This is CT3. Let us briefly consider how this feature of Leibniz’s theory fits within the framework under consideration. The regress of determination involved in the individuation of successive states implies that each state in a specified series of states is limited by every other state in the series. This suggests that each state in the series is a partial cause of every other state, while the substance as a determinate whole is the total cause of each state. This explains how Leibniz can speak of a substance’s states as being caused by other states and as being caused by the substance itself, but it does not explain the unique relation between one state and its preceding state. We can do this, I would suggest, by appealing to the notion of expression (or representation). Insofar as a series of states is reflectively specified, each state in the series expresses all the other states. But this expression comes in varying degrees of confusion and distinctness. Each specified state most distinctively expresses its succeeding state and is most distinctly expressed by its preceding state. It is only in this sense that one state can be thought of as the cause of another state.37

We can begin to move beyond CT1–CT3 to Leibniz’s account of creation by contrasting God’s knowledge of a substance with a substance’s understanding of itself. A substance understands itself by reflectively specifying a state and conceiving that state as bounded by a series of preceding and succeeding states. In order to completely understand the initially specified state the substance would have to understand an actual infinity of determining states. Leibniz does not think that a finite substance can attain a complete understanding of any of its states.38 But the infinite substance does, of course. God does not attain such knowledge, however, by starting with one state of a monad and working his way out to a completed infinite series. On the contrary, God knows the monad as a non-aggregated whole sub specie aeternitatis (from the perspective of eternity). And what does God perceive? Does he perceive an entity that is conditioned by Newtonian temporal flow? This is unlikely. It is more plausible to think that the Leibnizian God perceives a monad as a strictly non-spatial and atemporal expression of its worldmates (it is a central Leibnizian thesis that each monad expresses or represents all of the other finite substances in the universe).39 If this is correct, then finite substances are non-spatial and atemporal at the deepest level of Leibniz’s ontology. The reflective division of a monad into successive states, in contrast, occurs only at the level of appearances (or phenomena).

This suggests that Leibniz was committed to the following account of creation: in a single miraculous act God creates finite substances that are non-spatial and atemporal at the deepest level of reality. I shall refer to this as the Strict Metaphysical Account of Creation.40 Leibniz does not, to my knowledge, explicitly affirm the Strict Metaphysical Account of Creation. It is worth keeping in mind, however, that Leibniz is often reluctant to fully reveal certain tenets of his deep metaphysics—particularly if he thinks they are likely to be misunderstood, or viewed as theologically unacceptable. More importantly, many features of Leibniz’s metaphysics point in the direction of the Strict Account: his characterization of simple substances as ‘metaphysical points,’ his commitment to the thesis that created substances are mirrors of God, and his view that space and time are merely ideal, to cite several examples.41 Indeed, if Leibniz is really committed to
the thesis that finite substances are atemporal (as many of his commentators have asserted) then it is difficult to see how he could have been committed to any other account of creation.\(^42\) Thus, although it is admittedly speculative to attribute the Strict Metaphysical Account to Leibniz, I think it is a reasonable interpretive move all things considered.

The Strict Account of Creation has far reaching consequences for understanding how Leibniz’s theory of causation differs from occasionalism and mere conservationism. First, it suggests that he subtly rejects a presupposition common to standard versions of both theories, namely that there is a real temporal distance between a substance in its initial state and the substance in its subsequent states. This presupposition is particularly important for the mere conservationist, for it allows her to claim that the dependence of creatures on God at the initial moment of creation is immediate, but that the dependence of the actions of creatures on God thereafter is only mediate. If one is committed to the Strict Account of Creation, however, then the mere conservationist position cannot get off the ground. Given that substances are not temporally conditioned (at the deepest level of reality), there is no room for the dependence of creatures on God to be immediate at an initial moment of creation and mediate thereafter.

As I suggested earlier, the successive states of a substance are only distinguished at the level of appearances (or phenomena). For any particular state that is specified, one can ask: do I depend on God in this state any less than at ‘the time of my beginning’? The answer is always no. The dependence of a creature on God at any specified state is complete and immediate because every successive state is a limitation of a substance that, at the deepest level of metaphysical rigor, God creates and conserves in a single act. This single act eminently contains any state that is reflectively individuated in a substance.

This analysis of the dependence of creatures on God explains Leibniz’s commitment to CT4 (everything positive in creatures is produced immediately by the divine will) and CT5 (there are no two times at which the dependence of creatures on God is different), and it is what leads Leibniz to affirm the continual creation doctrine. As he puts it in the New System, ‘all things, with all their reality, are continually produced by the power of God’ (G 4:483; AG:143). This does not mean that God literally re-creates a substance in a series of successive states, however, for the duration of a monad is not divided into successive states at the deepest level of Leibniz’s ontology. Leibniz is willing to affirm the continual creation doctrine, I believe, because it provides an acceptable way of conceptualizing the dependence of creatures on God at the level of appearances.

This conclusion is of the utmost importance for understanding how Leibniz’s theory of creaturely activity differs in a principled way from occasionalism. His key point of disagreement concerns the continual creation doctrine. Leibniz takes the occasionalists to be committed to the re-creation of all things at every instant. As we have seen, such a view would reduce the creature to a discontinuous series of instantaneous states, where nothing that is created at one instant could endure, strictly speaking, to the next instant. But that which does not endure can only be a modification, not a substance. The purported ‘substance’ would thereby resolve into a discontinuous succession of modifications (if even that). In order to achieve an ontology of created substances, one must be able to hold that a series of states arise from the depths of identically the same finite substance. A straightforward commitment to the continual creation doctrine does not allow for this, but Leibniz’s more nuanced affirmation of the doctrine does. It allows him to agree with the occasionalists about the truth of CT4 without having to give up his commitment to CT1, CT2, and CT3.

I have presented an interpretation of Leibniz’s theory of creaturely and divine causation that explains how he can consistently affirm CT1-CT5. The interpretation also provides an
explanation of how Leibniz’s account differs in principled ways from both mere conservationism and occasionalism. The final question that I shall briefly address is whether Leibniz’s theory should be regarded as a theory of divine concurrence. I think it should be so regarded, although it is important to recognize that it is an unorthodox version. It is unorthodox because it implies that strictly speaking divine conservation and divine concurrence are nothing over and above divine creation. Nevertheless, the analysis of CT1-CT5 that has been provided implies that effects (successive monadic states) are caused immediately by God and by finite substances, which is precisely what a theory of divine concurrence requires. As we have seen, the regress of determination that is involved in the individuation of successive states implies that any reflectively specified state follows from the substance itself. In other words, the substance itself is the immediate cause of all of its successive states. But God also can be said to immediately produce these states because the states are limitations of a substance that God creates and conserves in a single atemporal act. These states do not have any reality over and above the reality of the substance. On the contrary, the states just are the substance considered as limited in one way or another. By creating the finite substance as a non-spatial and atemporal whole, God is the immediate cause of any successive state of that substance that is specified at the level of appearances.

Let us briefly consider two objections to the interpretation of divine concurrence that I have sketched. First, one might worry that the interpretation does not allow Leibnizian intra-substantial causation to be sufficiently real. Intra-substantial causation is a relation that holds between the successive states of a substance (CT3) or between a substance and its successive states (CT2). But if successive states are only distinguished at the level of appearances—as the account I have presented maintains—then intra-substantial causation must be illusory or unreal.

The first thing to note in response to this objection is that Leibniz is not working with a straightforward appearance/reality distinction according to which anything that is classified as an appearance is thereby unreal. Leibniz thinks that there are degrees of reality; some things are more real than others. Things that Leibniz classifies as appearances or phenomena are not fundamental constituents of reality. Nevertheless, Leibniz will often classify such entities as real if they are grounded in or well-founded on the fundamental constituents of reality. Leibniz does not think that bodies, for example, are fundamental constituents of reality; but he does think that they are well-founded on the reality of simple, immaterial, mind-like substances. They are thus real—but not fundamental—entities.

One of the biggest challenges that Leibniz commentators face is trying to figure out how Leibniz conceived of the various degrees of reality in his ontology (if he did in fact come to a stable position on this difficult issue). In the case of successive monadic states, it is not immediately obvious where they are supposed to fit into Leibniz’s ontological scheme. It is clear that he thinks successive states are real, but this does not by itself imply that successive states must be something more than well-founded phenomena (given that well-founded phenomena are real). So far as I have been able to determine Leibniz does not explicitly commit himself one way or the other on this issue. It would be a mistake to assume then, that Leibniz takes successive states to be something more than well-founded phenomena (i.e., that he takes successive states to be more than phenomena that are well-founded on the reality of the monad as a completely determinate and non-aggregated whole). My point, of course, is simply that there is no straightforward incompatibility between the thesis that successive states are individuated at the level of phenomena and the thesis that successive states and intra-substantial causation are real. In other words, the interpretation of intra-substantial causation sketched above does not imply that intra-
substantial causation is a mere illusion or unreal (though it is admittedly less real than a number of Leibniz commentators have thought).

The second objection focuses on the notion of reflective individuation. According to the proposed account of divine concurrence the successive states of a finite substance are individuated reflectively. And as we have seen, both God and a finite substance are immediate causes of any reflectively individuated state. But what, one might ask, about the acts of reflective individuation themselves? Are they determined by God? If they are so determined, then wouldn’t Leibniz’s position collapse back into occasionalism after all? And if they are not, then surely acts of reflective individuation would violate the thesis that everything positive in creatures follows immediately from the divine will (CT4).  

Recall that according to the account of creation under consideration God creates and conserves finite substances in a single atemporal act. These finite substances are themselves non-spatial and atemporal—considered from the perspective of divine omniscience. Although they do not contain successive states (again, considered from the perspective of divine omniscience), they contain the foundation for any successive states that are individuated at the level of appearances. Similarly, they contain the foundation for the substance’s acts of reflective individuation. Neither the successive states of a substance nor the substance’s acts of reflective individuation involve any reality over and above what is bestowed on it in creation. One can thus say that a substance’s successive states and its acts of reflective individuation are eminently contained in God’s single act of creation and conservation (thus securing CT4). This does place Leibniz’s position close to occasionalism. Leibniz would insist, however, that this does not prevent him from holding that the substance itself performs acts of reflective individuation. One might still worry that CT4 does not allow for a sufficiently robust conception of reflective activity—particularly if one has incompatibilist tendencies. But Leibniz will have no truck with incompatibilism; he is a determinist through and through.

It is time to take stock. Leibniz affirms CT1-CT5 on many occasions, but it is quite difficult to see how he can consistently affirm all of these causal theses. I have argued that two recent interpretations of Leibniz’s account of divine concurrence—those presented by Robert Adams and Sukjae Lee—do not succeed in this daunting explanatory task. I have also sketched an alternative interpretation that provides a more plausible (though admittedly speculative) account of how CT1-CT5 can be seen as complimentary aspects of a unified theory of causation. It is an interpretation that I believe is worthy of further consideration.

**Abbreviations**

Short Biography


Notes

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1 God’s works in the ordinary course of nature are contrasted with extraordinary or miraculous works.

2 See Alfred Freddoso for a helpful overview of these three theories (1994).

3 Some philosophers in the early modern period endorsed restricted forms of occasionalism. See Nadler (1998).

4 See e.g., Nicolas Malebranche, the foremost occasionalist of the early modern period (OCM 12:156-8; JS:112-6). This theory is associated primarily with fourteenth century theologian and philosopher William Durandus. Durandus presents the view in his commentary on Peter Lombard’s *Sentences* (*In Sententias Theologicas Petri Lombardi Commentariorum Libri Quattuor* bk. 2, dist. 1, q. 5). For a translation see Alfred Freddoso’s website (http://www.nd.edu/%7Eafreddos/translat/duran215.htm).

5 Roughly, the active powers of a creature are its capacities to produce effects; the passive powers are its capacities to be acted upon by other creatures.

6 See e.g., Malebranche (OC 3:327-44; LO: 676-80) and Durandus de Saint-Pourçain (1571):130d-131d.


8 See e.g., (T:27).

9 This is only one of several of Leibniz’s criticisms of occasionalism. For an illuminating discussion of Leibniz’s critique see Rutherford (1993).

10 Several of these texts will be cited in the pages ahead. For additional texts and a discussion of the apparent tension between them see Sleigh (1990a:183-5).

11 These interpretations are all of Leibniz’s mature view on divine concurrence. Leibniz’s mature metaphysics is largely in place by the time that he publishes the New System of Nature in 1695.

12 Some commentators have argued that Leibniz’s mature ontology countenances corporeal substances in addition to simple substances. I will bracket this issue in the present study. See Robert Adams (1994:262-307) and Donald Rutherford (1995:265-82) for two classic (and opposed) analyses of Leibniz’s mature account of corporeal substance. For a rich and nuanced interpretation that emphasizes the development of Leibniz’s views on this issue see Garber (2009).

13 (G 4:478-9; AG:139), (23 March 1690 letter to Arnauld; G 2:136; LA:170), (G 4:507-12; AG:158-63), (24 March/3 April 1699 letter to De Volder; G 2:171; AG:173), (G 4:548-9; WF:104), (21 January 1704 letter to De Volder; G 2:264; L:335), (T:291).
it would contradict Leibniz's claim that everything positive in creatures is an immediate result of the divine will to a version of mere conservationism. Given that the accidental modifications of a substance are something positive, could not accept this proposed modification, however, because it would violate CT4 and reduce Leibniz's theory accidental modifications could then be attributed exclusively to the primitive force of the finite substance. Leibniz tive force of a substance at every instant – not the nature and its accidental modifications. The production of the

that 'every modification presupposes something that endures' (G 2:251; AG:176).

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15 (G 4:439-40; AG:47), (G 4:484-5; AG:143-4), (G 4:573-4; WF:139), (G 6:567; WF:196), (G 6:609-10; AG:215), (T:65), (T:399). Some commentators think that CT3 (and presumably CT2) should be formulated with an exception for an initial state and miraculous states. See e.g., Sleigh (1990a:134-6).

16 (G 4:439-40; AG:47), (G 4:573-4; WF:139), (G 3:468; WF:179), (G 6:610; AG:216).

17 CT2 and CT3 have sometimes been interpreted as being in tension with one another. See e.g., Bobro and Clatterbaugh (1996:408-25). Rutherford makes a strong case for the conclusion that these theses are complimentary rather than inconsistent (2005:161-166).

18 (G 4:439-40; AG:46), (G 4:483; AG:143), (G 6:568; WF:197), (G 4:514; AG:165), (T:27).

19 (T:385).

20 See Sleigh (1990a:185). See also Vialati, who concludes that 'one can hardly escape the impression that Leibniz's position was closer to Durandus than he cared to admit' (2002:230).

21 Another prominent commentator who emphasizes the importance of this text is André Robinet (1986:433-6).

22 One might be tempted to modify Adams’ interpretation by suggesting that God only produces the nature/primitive force of a substance at every instant – not the nature and its accidental modifications. The production of the accidental modifications could then be attributed exclusively to the primitive force of the finite substance. Leibniz could not accept this proposed modification, however, because it would violate CT4 and reduce Leibniz’s theory to a version of mere conservatism. Given that the accidental modifications of a substance are something positive, it would contradict Leibniz’s claim that everything positive in creatures is an immediate result of the divine will (CT4). In other words, it would imply that God is only the mediate cause of a substance’s accidental modifications. To accept this conclusion would be to endorse mere conservatism.

23 2004:203.

24 2004:222.

25 For a helpful overview of Leibniz’s ruminations on the labyrinth of the continuum see the introduction to Richard Arthur’s translation volume (RA).

26 See e.g., On Nature Itself (G 4:511; AG:162).

27 See e.g., NE:153.

28 The thesis that instantaneous states are idealizations has recently been defended by Rutherford (2008). Ruther-

ford approaches the issue through an analysis of Leibniz’s dynamics.

29 Leibniz explicitly draws this conclusion in an argument for the conclusion that there are no precise shapes in

nature: ‘Now I believe that what is only in a moment has no existence, since it begins and ends at the same time’

(FC:245).

30 See On Nature Itself (G 4:508; AG:159-60) and Leibniz’s 20 June 1703 letter to de Volder, where he writes that
‘every modification presupposes something that endures’ (G 2:251; AG:176).

31 For a more detailed analysis of Leibniz’s view on the continual creation doctrine see my ‘Continual Creation

and Finite Substance in Leibniz’s Metaphysics.’

32 It is of course possible that Leibniz does not have a fully worked out mature view on this matter.

33 I do not claim that the interpretation I present is the only possible alternative to the interpretations presented by

Adams and Lee. For a different interpretation that does not presuppose that Leibniz is committed to the literal truth

of the continual creation doctrine see McDonough (2007).

34 This thesis is defended by Cover and O’Leary Hawthorne (1999:224). See also Whipple (2010)

35 See e.g., (G 2:270; AG:180), (G 3:457; WF:201), and T:395.

36 Leibniz sometimes explains limitations in terms of boundaries. See e.g., GR:365-6; AG:114-5.

37 This approach to understanding Leibnizian intra-substantial causation raises a number of important questions,

which I do not have the space to discuss in this paper. [These questions are discussed in ‘Leibniz’s Unified theory

of Causation.’] For an illuminating analysis of Leibniz’s views on expression, see Nelson (Nelson 2005).

38 See e.g., (G 6:617; AG:221), and (T:403).

39 Although each substance is an expression of its worldmates no two expressions are exactly the same because of

differences in degrees of the clarity and confusion of the expression. As Leibniz frequently claims, each substance

expresses the universe from a particular point of view. See G 4:439-40; AG:46-7. The interpretation I have pre-
sented presupposes that Leibniz does not treat appetition as a fundamentally different sort of modification than

perception. This position is argued for by McRae (1976:59-60), Clatterbaugh (1973:8-9), and Kulstad (1990).

40 Jaques Jalabert presents a single act interpretation of creation in his important (and insufficiently appreciated)

work La Theorie Leibnizienne de la Substance (1947:167-78).

41 The claim that simple substances are ‘metaphysical points’ occurs in the New System of Nature (G 4:482;

AG:142). A clear statement of the mirrors of God thesis can be found in the Discourse on Metaphysics (G 4:434;

AG:42). On the analogy between space and time and the claim that space and time are ideal, see Leibniz’s fifth let-
ter to Clarke (G 7:402-3; AG:340).

42 Among the commentators who take Leibniz to hold that simple substances are atemporal are Rutherford


43 For interpretations of Leibniz’s account of divine concurrence that hold that concurrence is something over and

Robert Sleigh has suggested that the key to understanding Leibniz’s account of divine concurrence lies in the distinction Leibniz draws between perfection and limitation (1991:183-5). Sleigh thinks that Leibniz is committed to a view according to which whatever there is of perfection in the states of finite substances comes directly from God, while whatever there is of limitation in the states of finite substances comes from the finite substances themselves. Sleigh is not sure exactly how this distinction should be understood, though he denies that it should be understood in terms of a strict division of labor between God and finite substances. In other words, it cannot be the case that each state of a substance is divided into one part comprised of perfections, which comes from God, and one part comprised of limitations, which comes from the finite substance (on pain of attributing a form of mere conservationism to Leibniz). Several commentators have suggested that Leibniz’s distinction between perfection and limitation is not helpful in understanding how his causal theory differs from occasionalism and mere conservationism because the only ways of understanding the distinction are (1) in terms of a division of labor (mentioned above), or (2) in terms of a privation analysis of limitation according to which limitations are mere lacks of being. If limitations are mere negations or lacks of being (as (2) states) then finite substances do not really make any positive causal contribution, which would seem to reduce Leibniz’s position to a form of occasionalism. The interpretation I have sketched suggests that there is a third way of understanding the perfection/limitation distinction. The substance’s successive states are limitations. To say that whatever there is of perfection in the states of a substance comes from God and that limitations come from the creature is simply to say that the effect as a whole is caused immediately by the finite substance (in virtue of the substance’s reflective activity) and immediately caused by God (in virtue of God’s creation of the substance as a non-spatial and atemporal unity). One can thus view the interpretation I have sketched as a development of Sleigh’s suggestion that the perfection/limitation distinction lies at the heart of Leibniz’s theory of divine concurrence.

See G2: 253; AG: 178.

For an influential account of degrees of reality in Leibniz’s ontology see Hartz and Cover (1988).

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Works Cited


——. ‘Leibniz’s United Theory of Causation’ manuscript.