

# CHAPTER 09

## MONADOLOGICAL ONTOLOGIES AFTER SPINOZA:

### LEIBNIZ, HEGEL, STIRNER, MCTAGGART, TARDE, AND WEIL

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#### ABSTRACT

The concept of the monad offers one of the best explanations of personality-related phenomena, because a monad combines both the ideas of the one and the many –or the ideas of the common and the distinct– without creating a contradiction. Monadological theories of personhood are monistic without being reductive and incorporate the idea of spirit or thought without resorting to complex theories of emergence. Moreover, the monadologists point out that any reductionist monistic theory ultimately results in an implicitly accepted notion of the monad. Otherwise, the philosopher must accept either a kind of solipsism. Gabriel Tarde's monadological theory of sociality provides the necessary adaptations that allow its application to the explanation of the phenomenon of human sociality.

**Keywords:** Monads, ontology, philosophy, personal existence, sociality

#### I. THE NECESSITY OF MONADS

The most fascinating puzzle in philosophy is the phenomenon of personality. A person is a conscious entity characterized by a seemingly insurmountable contradiction. The common characteristic of persons is that each is radically and completely different from every other person. This difference is fundamental to our experience as individuals, because we know that we have no access to the inner nature of any other person, except for the information we receive through observation of their potential existence and behavior. We cannot predict the existence of a particular person either from a posteriori data or by a priori reasoning, and we can only make limited predictions about the future behaviors and actions of persons known to us, even if we know all their past actions and behaviors. Moreover, we have only a vague idea of our future actions and personal situations, despite the fact that in most cases we recognize that every activity in the present –including our thoughts– fits perfectly into the course of our past actions, situations and thoughts. Therefore, not only is each person radically and fundamentally different from every other person, but our nature as persons is –at least in part– indeterminable even for us. Thus, from the point of view of the radical and absolute separation of persons, the fact that we share a common world with other persons and can interact with them seems as mysterious as the very existence of our timeless personal identity.

The concept of the monad offers one of the best explanations of personality-related phenomena, because a monad combines both the ideas of the one and the many –or the ideas of the common and the distinct– without creating a contradiction. Monadological theories of personhood are monistic without being reductive and incorporate the idea of spirit or thought without resorting to complex theories of emergence. Moreover, the monadologists point out that any reductionist monistic theory ultimately results in an implicitly accepted notion of the monad. Otherwise, the philosopher must accept either a kind of solipsism (see, for example, Carnap or Fichte) or a kind of monopsychism or hylozoism (as is the case, for example, with Parmenides, Pythagoras, Averroes, and Ernst Hckel).

## II. THE NATURE OF THE MONADS AND THE MONADOLOGICAL UNIVERSE

The basic framework of any monadological ontology is a system of completely separate entities (the monads) that are nevertheless linked together by their own intrinsic characteristics. To form such a system, a monad must have a very specific internal structure that allows both its absolute separation from any other monad and the formation of an external interaction between the monads. A monad is considered a simple entity –that is, an entity that is not composed of separate parts. A monad, however, is neither dimensionless, i.e. a point, nor atomic (i.e. indivisible). A monad consists of an infinite number of parts that have the same nature as the monad itself. Each part also consists of an infinite number of parts that are of the same nature as the higher parts and the whole monad (i.e. infinitely divisible). The infinite divisibility of a monad is a necessary condition for the unity of the monad, so that the parts of a monad belong only to that and not to any other monad. Thus, each monad is absolutely separable from every other monad. Only then is it possible for the monad to exist as such.

The unity of the monad, however, requires a second condition: a special relation between the parts of the monad and their subparts and subparts of subparts up to infinity, which ensures that each part and subpart is part of that monad and not of any other. This relationship, which connects all the parts of the monad and ensures its internal unity, manifests itself as activity because the monad is an active one. This activity is traditionally called the momentum (*conatus*) of the monad.

The monad has another active feature that is oriented towards other monads and aims to incorporate them into its own nature. This second form of activity is traditionally called sense (*perceptio*). From the fact that each monad is indestructible because it cannot decompose into self-sustaining parts, it follows that the mutual sense of monads results only in an external relation that forms a complex of monads. Each cluster of monads can be considered an entity in its own right, although not unique in nature, and has its own relationship with other clusters. Because each monad can perceive any other monad, the number of complexes formed in this way is infinite. The absolute complex containing an infinite number of these interconnected complexes is called the *universe*.

As for the number of monads, this issue cannot be resolved from the perspective of each monad. It is clear, however, that the number of complexes formed by the aesthetic activity of the monads, as well as the number of parts of each monad, is infinite.

The sense of a monad includes all other monads as well as the universe –that is, the content of the relations among monads. This total content of the senses makes up the jointly perceived external world, the phenomenal reality, of the monads. It is the world of time, space, matter, quality, quantity, the world of change, of contingency and necessity, of energy and passivity, of life and death. Instead, the absolute reality of the unique universe is influenced and structured not by these categories but by the relations between the monads and between the senses of the monads. These relations are of the nature of logical necessity.

Any monadological ontology must explain how the characteristics of sensible phenomenal reality can be derived from the characteristics of the absolute reality of the monads and their complex universe. This explanation is particularly difficult for phenomena such as time, variation, causality, contingency, and necessity and cannot be discussed in the context of this essay. Suffice it to mention that the majority of modern monadological ontologies, starting from Spinoza's position on the identification of God with Nature, claim that time, change and contingency are the results of the aesthetic activity of the monads.

### III. MONADOLOGICAL ONTOLOGIES BEFORE SPINOZA AND THE PROBLEM OF CHANGE

As mentioned above, monadological ontologies are not a modern philosophical invention, although the modern meaning of the term has been shaped mainly by Leibniz. The term “monad”, however, was first used in the context of Pythagorean philosophy as a designation of the unique origin of the world. It is therefore necessary to distinguish *monadological* ontologies from *unity-generating* ontologies (i.e. ontologies that reduce the entire world to a single principle). Monadological systems in the sense of the term used here were proposed in Antiquity by Plato in his *Timaeus*, Aristotle in his *On the Soul*, and Plotinus, who can be considered the originator of the post-Spinozist monadological approaches. In the *Timaeus*, Plato describes the system of monads as a system of individual souls that are in heaven as stars and materialize on earth as persons through their confinement in material bodies to live a more or less virtuous life. These souls then enter a series of material transformations on their way back to eternal heaven. In Aristotle’s *On the Soul*, the entities corresponding to the monads are the individual souls of living beings, especially the souls of human beings, which, because of their participation in the eternal divine mind, are at least partially incorruptible.

Unlike the post-Spinozist monadological ontologies, the monadological ontologies of Plato, Aristotle, and Plotinus, as well as their successors, especially St. Thomas Aquinas, do not consider change and time as mere constituent elements of phenomenal reality. These ontologies instead propose a world in which change and immobility coexist because the existence of the sensible world is explained as the result of the interaction between form and matter. Thus, change and time are components of absolute reality despite the fact that reality itself is immutable in nature. Another very important difference between ancient and modern ontologies is that the former consider monads as universals, while the vast majority of modern monadological ontologies take a nominalist stance, rejecting the reality of universals.

Saint Augustine seems to have been the first monadological philosopher of late Antiquity to adopt an esoteric approach to the reality of time and change, placing both in the nature of man, because only man knows that he has been given a certain amount of time to achieve redemption. St. Thomas Aquinas was the last great pre-Spinozist monadological philosopher, who in his work *On Being and Essence (De ente et essentia)*,<sup>316</sup> gave a full and complete account of a universal monadological ontology.

With Descartes the era of modern nominalist philosophy begins. His thought has elements of a monadological approach. However, he separates momentum from sensation by attributing the former to the extended thing (*res extensa*) and the latter to the thinking thing (*res cogitans*). This separation is one of the reasons why his ontology collapsed into the notorious dualism of his substances. Descartes tried to circumvent the problem of the reality of time and change by placing them in the realm of the extended thing, which coexists on the same ontological level as the timeless thinking thing.

### IV. THE MONADOLOGICAL TRADITION AFTER SPINOZA

Spinoza occupies a key position in the development of monadological philosophy because in his attempt to overcome the Cartesian dualism, he formulated the general outline of the modern concept of the monad. However, Spinoza considers monads as modes (*modi*) of a monadologically intellectual totality, which he calls “*God or Nature*”. The change in this totality is internal, and time is the way in which the modes of God (i.e. the smaller monads) experience the activity of God.

316 St. Thomas Aquinas, *De ente et essentia*, transl. by J. Bobick, University of Notre Dame Press 1988.

Spinoza's monadological universe has an inherent problem: It cannot offer a plausible explanation of the absolute separation of the modes understood as monads from the Whole (God or Nature) and from each other. In fact, the modes are nothing more than parts of the totality itself. Spinoza's dilemma can be formulated in this way: The modes are either (a) self-sufficient and absolutely separately existing entities possessing an individual nature and individual senses (in which case God cannot be conceived as a monad), or (b) they do not have the nature of monads, but are only parts of the monad that is God, if God is to be conceived as a monad. If the latter is true, the modes cannot have their own individual momentum (*conatus*), because that would mean that the nature of God contains a contradiction, because each entity with its own momentum opposes all other entities with momentum.

Leibniz, who introduced the term "*monad*" in its modern meaning, overcame this problem in his *Monadology* by stating that the system of monads (i.e. the universe) is autonomous and as such is absolutely separate from God, who is the only monad with the power to create monads. In this sense, the difference between "*simple*" monads and God is a difference in the degree of perfection. This difference explains why "*simple*" monads can only have a very vague sense of God and an incomplete sense of their own nature. But in Leibniz's universe a new problem arises, that of the synchronization of the senses. If each monad senses itself and the universe in its own unique way, then how is it possible that all monads share a common content of sensations? This problem can only be solved by the assumption that God created the universe of monads with a predetermined order, which includes the synchronization of the contents of the monad's senses and creates in each monad the sense of a uniform flow of time in which law-like changes occur. However, a paradox remains in Leibniz's monadological conception, the fact that the existence of the universe as a system of monads—including the social universe—is not the result of the interaction of monads, but it is implanted as an idea in each monad by God.

Kant tried to avoid the dangerous waters of Spinozian and Leibnizian ontology by resorting to a purely epistemological approach. In this sense, his philosophy cannot be regarded as monadological although it has many features in common with them. Hegel's system also contrasts with the post-Spinozist monadological tradition described here, despite the fact that his philosophy of nature and spirit provides an ingenious synthesis of the ideas of Spinoza and Leibniz and the monadological hylomorphism of St. Thomas Aquinas. However, the hermeneutical effort required to demonstrate this synthesis would go beyond the scope of this essay.

The concept of the "*one and only*" (*Einziger*) or "*the appropriator*" (*Eigner*) developed by Max Stirner,<sup>317</sup> who belonged to the so-called "*left Hegelians*", is a more explicit application of a monadological ontology. In Stirner's philosophy, the *Eigner* is seen as a monad whose drive manifests itself as a tendency to 'appropriate' and 'consume' the world and other monads. Stirner calls this appropriating capacity or power of the appropriator, which is analogous to the classical monadological activity of the sensation (*perceptio*), "*property*" (*Eigentum*). As a nominalist monadologist, Stirner strongly rejected the normative force of ideas, including the concept of obligation, especially in relation to moral, social, and political institutions. For him, ideas are only ghosts (*Sparren*) that force people into activities and situations that contradict their immediate needs. For Stirner, the only form of legitimate cooperation among men is the "*Union of Egoists*", which is constituted only by the temporary coincidence of the interests of its members and exists only as long as this coincidence exists. There are two main differences between Stirner's Appropriator and Leibniz's conception of the monad: First, Stirner's Appropriator is mortal and perishable. His appropriating power fades after he is consumed by the appropriating power of the other Appropriators. Stirner's Appropriator is mortal in the literal sense of the word, whereas the classical monad is not perishable because it is ontologically simple. Second, the appropriating activity of the Appropriator has the character of a

317 The main work of Max Stirner (1806–1856) is the book *Der Einzige und sein Eigentum*, published in 1844.

relationship. Thus, the social universe is created by the activity of the monads themselves, without any need for a divine predetermined order. In this sense, Stirner can be seen as the originator of a school of thought that claims that relations are real and have the same ontological status as properties.

A very important, though completely forgotten, monadologist is the British philosopher John McTaggart Ellis McTaggart,<sup>318</sup> who lived and worked at Trinity College, Cambridge University and was a teacher and friend of Bertrand Russell and George E. Moore. McTaggart belonged to the second generation of so-called British Idealists and considered himself a neo-Hegelian. In his major work, *The Nature of Existence*, McTaggart makes a structuralist and logical reconstruction of Leibniz's monadology and presents a system that explains the nature of monads, here called "selves" or "spirits", and the existence of the predetermined order of the universe, rejecting the idea of creation by a more perfect monad (i.e. God). McTaggart gives a purely logical description of the momentum of monads by introducing the notion of "determining correspondence", which is a special relation between a "self" and its parts. The determining correspondence is the only relation that ensures the internal coherence of an infinitely divisible monad without ending in contradiction. The parts of a McTaggart monad (i.e. a self) have the same 'spirit-like' nature as the 'self' and allow for a special relation between the 'selves', which McTaggart calls perception. Unlike Stirner, McTaggart explicitly states that relations are as real as properties. He also believes that the creation of a relation creates a new secondary property, which in turn creates a secondary relation and so on in an infinite series of properties and relations. Furthermore, McTaggart accepts the negative property –that is, non-being– as a property of a monad or its parts. Consequently, by virtue of their properties and relations, all monads form an ordered complex universe that is –like the monads that make it up– eternal, uncreated and indestructible.

McTaggart's complex universe is not only immutable, but also incorporeal and immaterial. Change, time, matter and all the phenomena that make up our phenomenal reality arise from an inherent error in the content of the senses. This error is not fixed but undergoes a kind of negative evolution. In other words, our senses form a spectrum that extends from imperfection to perfection. This variation is the only kind of movement possible in McTaggart's complex universe. The sense of this evolution creates the phenomenal reality of time, as well as all other phenomenal categories (e.g. space, matter, sense data, knowledge and will). To my knowledge, McTaggart's monadology is the most consistent and metaphysically transparent interpretation of Leibniz's and Spinoza's systems, despite the many explanatory gaps that arise mainly from McTaggart's radical nominalism, something he shares with almost all other nominalists.

Gabriel Tarde's<sup>319</sup> monadological theory of sociality uses a more traditional terminology but provides the necessary adaptations that allow its application to the explanation of the phenomenon of human sociality. Tarde considers any ordered association of monads as a social phenomenon and derives from it the main aspects of monads, *mania* (avidity) and possession (possession). Mania is Tarde's equivalent term to the traditional notion of momentum (*conatus*) and possession is the equivalent for sensation. In this sense, Tarde's approach bears a strong resemblance to that of Stirner. However, in the former, the possessive interactions of monads derive from the normative characteristics of human associations. At the same time Tarde recognizes, like McTaggart, that our phenomenal reality contains a considerable number of contradictions. He seems to think, however, that these contradictions are not indicative of the unreality of phenomenal reality, but rather are a kind of test or trial that we must undergo in order to gain eternal peace when we pass to the inanimate plane of existence.

318 John McTaggart Ellis McTaggart (1866–1925). I refer to his main work, *The Nature of Existence*, CUP 1921 (Vol. I) and 1927 (Vol. II).

319 Gabriel Tarde (1843–1904), *Monadologie et Sociologie* (English translation by Theo Lorenc, repress 2012).



The newest member of the monadological tradition is the French philosopher Simone Weil.<sup>320</sup> Like Tarde, Weil is one of the most overlooked contemporary thinkers, but her work has recently received the recognition it deserves. Weil's position differs in one crucial respect from the philosophical positions of the main post-Spinozist monadologists because she was explicitly antinominalist. Her monadological theory thus more closely resembles the Aristotelian conception of the soul as a form of human nature. According to Weil, man is the embodiment of human nature. Therefore, his momentum is not self-referential and temporal, but aims at the fulfilment of this form. Weil uses the term "*needs of the (human) soul*" to characterize this direction of momentum. The needs of the soul are order, freedom, obedience, responsibility, hierarchy, equality, danger, security, collective and individual property, truth, and freedom of opinion. The whole of human existence has a normative nature and is oriented towards an end, which means that the activity of each monad is directed towards the world and other monads and also has the character of a necessity of the soul, which Weil calls duty (obligation). The proper performance of duty allows the soul's needs to be fulfilled and results in a stable and balanced world. Weil's thought unfolds within the framework of the classical theistic tradition, which logically infers from the imperfection of human existence the existence of the perfect being, namely God, who is also the creator of the imperfect being. God is not part of the sensible world. His action is indirect and comes about through duty. A direct approach to God requires the abandonment of the sensible world and the transition to the divine level of existence, which corresponds to physical death. Thus Weil, like all other monadologists, sees death not as the total negation of existence or as a non-being, but rather as a transformation into another mode of existence, a mode of non-life.

## V. EPILOGUE

In this essay, I have tried to give a brief description of the philosophical significance of the monadological approach to ontology, which in my opinion is the best way to address the fundamental problem of personal existence. In addition, I have tried to present some basic elements of the monadological tradition, which has its roots in the philosophies of Plato and Aristotle, and, building on the pillar of Spinozism and Leibniz's monadology, still exerts a great influence on modern philosophical discourse. I do not claim to have presented a complete list of influential monadological philosophers and I believe that other very important philosophical positions, such as Michel Foucault's existentialism or idiosyncratic structuralism and Alfred North Whitehead's process philosophy have strong affinities with the monadological tradition outlined here.

Because each monadological approach reveals a new aspect and provides a new answer to the enigma of personal existence, hitherto neglected approaches, such as those of Simone Weil and Gabriel Tarde, deserve a closer examination.

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320 Simone Weil (1909–1943). I refer to her work, *L'Enracinement – Ou Prélude à une déclaration des devoirs envers l'être humain*, Flammarion 2014.

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