THE SCIENCE OF THE INDIVIDUAL: LEIBNIZ’S
ONTOLOGY OF INDIVIDUAL SUBSTANCE
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THE SCIENCE OF THE INDIVIDUAL: LEIBNIZ’S ONTOLOGY OF INDIVIDUAL SUBSTANCE

by

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Springer
“There is no face . . . whose contour does not form part of a geometric curve and cannot be drawn in one stroke by a certain regular movement.”

(Discours de métaphysique, § 6, A VI.4, 1538).

“But never can we reach by way of analysis the most universal laws [of our world], nor the most exhaustive rational explanation of singular things. Necessarily, indeed, this knowledge is reserved to God alone.”

(De natura veritatis, contingentiae et indifferentiae, A VI.4, 1518)
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*Pisa, September 2004*  
S.D.B
Introduction

Individual Substance in the Discourse
Metaphysics: Some Problems

Return to Individual: Leibniz’s ‘Remake’ of Categories 5

During the cold winter of 1686, while working as a supervisor of Hartz mines, the thirty-nine year old G.W. Leibniz wrote the draft of a short brilliant treatise on metaphysics.¹ Then he sent it, through the Catholic Prince Hessen-Rheinfels, to Antoine Arnauld, the prominent theologian of the Jansenist movement. As is well known, Arnauld reacted badly. His vehement disapproval was excited especially by section 13 of the draft, where Leibniz flatly asserted the ‘inclusion’ of the whole history of a human individual in his/her concept (‘notion’). From this reaction stems one of the most exciting intellectual exchanges of the seventeenth century.² Moreover, the debate about Leibniz’s real intentions has not ceased even today.

The ‘fatalistic’ consequences that terrified Arnauld in section 13 were only the corollary of a thesis put forward in section 8, the very heart of the draft. I wish to briefly expound this well-known text, in order to introduce the problems from which this research starts. First of all, a few words are in order about the position of DM 8 within the general architecture of the Discourse.

¹ See Discours de métaphysique, A VI.4, 1529–1588 (GP IV 427–463). As is well known, Leibniz never sent to Arnauld the complete Discourse. I am strongly inclined to think that the redaction of some articles of the Discourse we actually possess—I think especially of the intensively discussed DM 13—actually follows the discussion with Arnauld.

God’s plan in creating our world, hence the theme of perfection, divine and cosmic, is the true basso continuo underpinning the whole of this metaphysical baroque symphony. God’s perfection is the opening theme in sections 1–4. From the theory of divine perfection flows the cosmological sketch of sections 5–7 concerning world perfection. Here the first occurrence of the topic of miracle is located, that will be a leitmotiv in the Discourse. The discussion of the particular-general pair, applied to divine will, reveals the close confrontation with the greatest philosophical theodicy of the moment, the ‘Cartesian’ system of Father Nicholas Malebranche. We should remember that Leibniz’s interlocutor, Antoine Arnauld, was involved in a harsh controversy with Malebranche on these themes. The opening of DM 8 alludes, indeed, to a controversial issue of Malebranchian philosophy: “It is rather difficult to distinguish God’s actions from a creature’s ones . . .”3 Now, it was one of the central theses not only of Malebranche, but of the whole Occasionalist movement, that God only acts, i.e. God is the only efficient cause, of both physical and mental modifications. The belief in the activity of ‘secondary causes’ is stigmatized as the “most dangerous mistake of ancient philosophy” in Malebranche’s Recherche de la vérité.4 Leibniz does not settle the question of whether the thesis, or its opposite, according to which God does limit Himself ‘to conserving’ the force of created substances, is right. Instead of analyzing the notion of ‘action’, he shifts the focus of attention onto its subject, substance: “Now, since actions and passions belong properly to individual substances (actiones sunt suppositorum), it should be first explained, what to be such a substance means.”5 Under the apparently neutral appeal to the Scholastic dictum, Leibniz seems to solve the dilemma in favor of the second alternative. In any case, a first shift has led us from the concept of action to that of substance. The problem now is to define the latter, i.e. we are firstly concerned with the ‘intensional’ question of spelling out the notion of substance, better of ‘individual substance’ (the two are evidently held to be synonyms), which has to be carefully distinguished from the ‘extensional’ one of establishing which things in the world, and how many, are to be considered as substances.

The first characterization Leibniz gives of ‘individual substance’ is: the subject, to which all predicates or attributes are referred, without itself being referred to any other. This definition is still inadequate according to him, however. It is in fact merely a ‘nominal’ definition. In the terminology Leibniz had elaborated in earlier years, the label is reserved for a description which,

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3 A VI.4, 1539–1540 (GP IV 432).
4 Recherche de la vérité, book VI, part II, ch. III.
5 A VI.4 1540 (GP IV 432).
through correct and capable, as a matter of fact, of picking out an object by a ‘clear’ idea, does not exhibit, nevertheless, the possibility of its definitio-
dum, as is the case with a ‘real’ definition. Anyway, the burden of definition
is transferred from substance to predication. Already in putting forward this
nominal definition as something that goes without saying, Leibniz makes a
first decisive choice. Literally understood, his definition is far from original,
being nothing but a revival of the oldest definition of substance, such as was
advanced in Aristotle’s logical work, precisely in chapter 5 of the Categories.
Maybe we can appreciate Leibniz’s move better if we consider it against the
background of the philosophy of his time. Far from being a Scholastic relic,
in fact, the topic of substance lay at the core of the most innovative con-
temporary philosophies. They never emphasized, however, its ‘individual’
character. Despite their severe criticism of the ‘universals’ of the School, sub-
stance was thought of as something general, deprived of individual qualities:
be it Hobbes’s corporeal substance, or Descartes’ mind and body. Coming
back to the Categories model, on the contrary, Leibniz achieves a double re-
sult with the same move. Firstly, he places the individual again at the center
of the ontological scene; secondly, he replaces the inspection of mental con-
tents with logical-linguistic analysis. Aristotle was not very concerned with
the use-mention distinction in his treatise, and he left ambiguous enough for
his commentators in the following centuries, whether he was speaking about
words, meanings or things. At first sight, this feature is shared to a large extent
by DM 8.

Anyway, in Categories primary substance was introduced precisely as
the ‘ultimate subject’. More exactly, it was qualified as that which is not said
of a subject, nor is in a subject. The pair of ‘being said of’ and ‘being in’ was
handled accurately in chapter 2 of Aristotle’s treatise. Roughly speaking, the
first relation (a ‘predication’, in the proper sense) connects an essential feature
to a subject; typically, it predicates of an individual the species or genus to
which it belongs: in the technical language of the Categories, a ‘secondary
substance’, i.e. what we would call a ‘sortal’ such as ‘man’ or ‘horse’. The
other relation, instead, connects a non-essential characteristic, or accident, to
a subject, and is labeled as ‘inheritance’. Aristotle’s elusive characterization
is largely negative. To be in a subject, or to inhere, means “to exist within
something else, without being a part of it, and being unable to exist separately
from it.”6 Hobbes, as we shall see, still had great difficulty in his De Corpore
in providing a precise definition for Aristotle’s intended notions of inherence
and accident. Now, this is precisely what Leibniz aims to do, passing from the
‘nominal’ definition to a more adequate one, or in proper Leibnizian terms,

6 Categories, ch.2.
to the ‘real’ one: “We should consider what it means to be truly attributed to some subject.”\footnote{A V1 1540 (GP IV 432).} Once again, a seemingly innocent move conceals two strategic advances. Firstly, as a matter of fact Aristotle’s distinction is simply left out in the Leibnizian account. His ‘being attributed to’—which is expressed, a few lines below, as ‘being in’—simply cumulates, without further discussion, the two relations accurately distinguished in the ancient Categories. How such a shifting is performed so carelessly is perhaps a bit less surprising, if we observe that almost no reader, neither Arnauld nor later twentieth-century interpreters, noted it. For everyone, it is something quite in order, exactly as it was for Leibniz. Clearly, something should have happened in the tradition, between Aristotle and Leibniz, which decidedly determines the understanding of predication. I shall try to understand this in what follows, and great attention will be paid to the influence of the Nominalistic tradition. Here I would only remark, that the disappearing of the distinction of Categories 2 is accompanied by the disappearing of the whole topic of ‘secondary substances’, which occupied the main part of Categories 5. Secondly, if the relation resulting from blurring together the two Aristotelian ancestors derives its name from inference, its description matches more with the ancient idea of ‘predication’, or ‘being said of’. Moreover, the problem passes into the definition of true predication, hence ultimately of true proposition. So we come to the decisive shift from inference to truth.

“Otherwise, I Do Not Know What Truth Is”: Conceptual Containment as an Alleged Truism

At this point, Leibniz introduces what he himself later will present to Arnauld as the very heart of the matter, and the decisive argument against all objections. I allude to the so-called “containment theory of truth.” One of the clearest formulations of the theory is to be found in a text, known as First Truths, which Louis Couturat, the pioneering discover of Leibniz’s logic, emphasized as the true key to the understanding of the Discourse metaphysics. As is well known, indeed, according to the French scholar, all of Leibnizian metaphysics logically depends on the containment theory. From this perspective, the First Truths became, at the beginning of last century a classic supporting document for the ‘logicist’ interpretation. Although the Academy edition has shifted Couturat’s cherished text to some years later,\footnote{The text was first published by Couturat under the famous heading Primae veritates. Editing and commenting it, he exposed his interpretation of Leibniz’s metaphysics. See L. Couturat, Sur la métaphysique de Leibniz, in Revue de métaphysique et de morale 10 (1902); reprinted} and despite some
relevant differences of perspective, the parallelism of the two writings is nevertheless striking. The First Truths opens directly with the problem of the classification of truths. After discussing the dichotomy between primary and derivative truths, the former coinciding with formal identities, and the latter being reducible to the former through substitution, Leibniz is in a position to state the containment principle as a common rule of truth embracing both fields:

The predicate or consequent always is in the subject or antecedent, and here the general nature of truth lies, as Aristotle himself noted, I mean in the connection between the terms of a proposition . . . and this holds for every affirmative truth, universal or singular, necessary or contingent.9

From this principle many consequences are drawn, which largely correspond to the ‘corollaries’ that DM 9 derives from the concept of complete notion.

Now, a wholly ‘analytical’ theory of truth is likely to sound astonishing to our post-Kantian ears. Leibniz, however, can present it to Arnauld as the straightforward consequence of some self-evident, if not commonsense, principles expressing our elementary intuitions about truth. Moreover, he often reinforces his claim by invoking, this time explicitly, the authority of the greatest metaphysician of common sense: “as Aristotle himself noted.” Attributing the seminal idea of the containment theory to Aristotle is usual in the Leibnizian accounts of it. Leibniz’s alleged Aristotelian genealogy alludes to the relation of “belonging to” (hyparchein) of the syllogistic theory. This assimilation is made possible by the simplification of the predication theory with respect to the Categories model. Moreover, Leibniz’s definition gives a decidedly intensional reading of containment. But if the view of the individual as the basic building block of the ontological construction was actually an Aristotelian one, the same could hardly be said for this idea of truth. The account of truth prevailing within the Aristotelian tradition, in fact, was in terms of correspondence between a proposition and the world. On the contrary, in Leibniz’s theory, verifying a proposition seems to be a task one could perform looking simply into a concept, without caring about its attaching to the world. However this may be, Arnauld declared he was impressed by Leibniz’s argument. The true import of Arnauld’s admission, however, is far from clear. I strongly suspect that it concealed an extremely weak reading of the analytical theory, having the effect of making it devoid of ontological value, as we

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9 A VI.4, 1644 (C 518–519).
shall see later. A major task of interpretation will be, therefore, to clarify the content and motivations of Leibniz’s theory of truth, whose exact meaning is far from established and surely cannot be justified simply by relying on any well-known tradition.\(^\text{10}\)

In any event, three centuries after Arnauld’s, and one century after Couturat’s reading, and whether one takes seriously the ‘analytical’ claim (as Couturat did), or not (as, I think, Arnauld finally did), the problem is still open. How could Leibniz believe to draw such weighty metaphysical consequences from such abstract logical principles? He seems guilty of blurring together two different levels, or, if we prefer, material and formal speech. This, no matter whether the ‘deduction’ goes from logic to ontology, as Couturat and Russell held, or the opposite way, or better there is no univocal deduction, but an unbreakable whole of logical-metaphysical intuitions, as almost all later historians, reacting to ‘logicist’ interpretation, ended up holding. Nevertheless, I shall try to show that Leibniz’s move from the logical to the ontological level is far less uncritical than interpreters ever suspected.

**Notio Completa and Ens Completum: Concept and Object**

We are now, in our reading of DM 8, at the crucial juncture. From the containment theory, in fact, Leibniz draws his answer to the substance problem:

This being premised, we can say it is the nature of an individual substance or complete being to have a concept so complete that it is sufficient to make us understand and deduce from it all the predicates of the subject to which the concept is attributed. An accident, on the other hand, is a being whose concept does not include everything that can be attributed to the subject to which the concept is attributed. Thus the quality of king which belonged to Alexander the Great, if we abstract it from the subject, is not determined enough to define an individual, for it does not include the other qualities of the same subject or everything which the concept of this prince includes. God, on the contrary, in seeing the individual notion or ‘haecceity’ of Alexander, sees it in at the same time the basis and the reason for all the predicates which can truly be affirmed of him—for example, that he will conquer Darius and Porus . . .\(^\text{11}\)

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\(^{11}\) A VI, 1540–41 (GP IV 433, L 307–308).
“This being premised”: that is, if we admit that the containment theory provides the required ‘real definition’, or adequate understanding of predication. Then, it is easy to construct the concept of individual substance, by applying the containment criterion to true singular propositions. But what is the precise structure of the highly brachylogical argument?

An attentive reading of this decisive passage dispels the suspicion of an unnoticed coincidence or, worse, of a sheer confusion, between object and concept. ‘Individual substance’ clearly is an ontological item i.e. something belonging to the furniture of the world, on a par with its correlate, ‘accident’ or ‘quality’. I wish to emphasize the fact that the adjective ‘complete’ makes its first appearance in DM 8 just as an attribute of this substance (‘complete being’) and not of the concept. Confronted with substance, accident is considered implicitly as an ‘incomplete being’, whatever this might mean (presumably, we can render it as ‘abstract’, which has to be cleared up, anyway). Both substance and accident, then, have their ‘notions’, or conceptual counterparts. The containment principle, however it should be understood, holds precisely on this level, or between these concepts. But what exactly about the ‘subject’ the concept is attributed to? As the context unmistakably shows, the possession of a complete concept is meant to work as a condition both necessary and sufficient for being an individual substance, or a complete being. Now, according to the general rule of truth, the containment of all predicate concepts within the appropriate subject concept happens to be verified for all truths, whatever concept they concern. Therefore, this feature could hardly be seen as a distinguishing one for individual substances, i.e. as a condition sufficient to circumscribe these ontologically basic items.²² As Leibniz says in a letter to Hessen-Rheinfels: “Can one deny that every thing (whether genus, species or individual) has a complete concept, according to which God, who conceives of everything perfectly, conceives of it, that is to say a concept which contains or includes everything that can be said of the thing . . .?”²³ In other words, the universality of the rule of truth establishes containment also for specific concepts: but then, if ‘subject’ were to be simply read as a logical subject, also properties such as ‘being a king’, or abstract beings such as ‘triangle’, when figuring in the subject position, would satisfy our requirement and they would claim to have complete concepts, or to be complete beings, in blatant contrast to the general tenor of DM 8. A note in a draft of the letter of July 1686 to Arnauld, however, draws an accurate distinction between the two types of ‘completeness’. The technicality of the

²² This point has been made in D. Rutherford, Truth, Predication and the Complete Concept of an Individual Substance, in Leibniz: Questions de Logique, Studia Leibnitiana Sonderheft 15, Steiner, Stuttgart 1988, 130–144.

²³ GP II 131, Mason 73.
remark is attested by the fact that it is written in Latin: “a full concept [notio plena] includes all the predicates of the thing e.g., of heat; a complete concept [completa] all the predicates of the subject, e.g. of this hot thing [hujus calidi]. In the case of individual substance they do coincide.”

It is the only explicit echo, in the Arnauld correspondence, of the great deal of linguistic ontological reflections Leibniz devoted to the problem of abstractness. What is important now to remark, is the distinction between ‘full’ and ‘complete’: where the former qualifies the predicative completeness of an abstract subject, while the latter is reserved for the predicative completeness of the true subject. This ‘subject’, therefore, should be intended as an ontological item, the ultimately underlying being the concepts of both substance and accident are attributed to and which they express partially, in the case of the accident concept, or totally, in the case of the substance concept.

All this amounts to saying that the ontological idea of ‘subject’ and the related completeness is presupposed by the construction of the complete concept. In the dense phrases of DM 8 we can divine the meeting point of two trains of thought which develop, in a relatively parallel way, though mutually interacting. On one hand, the growth of the ontological idea of the ‘complete being’ (ens completum), playing the role of the metaphysical subject of predication; on the other, the construction of the ‘complete concept’ (notio completa), working as a logical subject of proposition, on the ground of the containment theory of truth. Of this interpretative hypothesis, my research will offer a sort of historical confirmation, if not a quasi-genetic verification. Thus, the first part of my book will try to explore precisely the development of the ontological idea of ‘complete being’.

We should bear in mind that Leibniz’s reflection on the relationship between thing and concept takes place in a period shaped by the deepest conflicts between competing ontological and epistemological paradigms: in a word, a period of deep transformations in the way of thinking the relations among things, ideas and words. Maybe the man to whom the Discourse is addressed, the ‘great Arnauld’, is the best symbol of these changes. Forty years earlier, Arnauld had a great discussion with René Descartes about the very nature of a ‘complete substance’. Descartes defended the possibility of inferring a real distinction between two substances from a conceptual one, i.e. from the fact that I can conceive the notion A without B, and vice versa. This possibility lies at the core of his capital ‘proof’ of the mind-body distinction, and is a typical

\[14\] GP II 49 note.

move of the new ‘way of ideas’, according to which we have access to things only through the analysis of our mental contents (‘ideas’). To this argument, Arnauld objected that we are not assured that our notion of A is complete, instead of being cut off from a richer one. In other words, we are not assured that it includes all the predicates of A. In Arnauld’s counterexamples, Descartes’ argument was reduced to a fallacious ‘inference from ignorance’, blurring an epistemic logic for a logic of truth. In his reply, Descartes distinguished this sense C1 of completeness from a sense C2. A concept is C1-complete, iff it comprehends all the predicates of the related object; it is C2-complete, iff we are assured that it is not obtained through an act of abstraction. Descartes reserved the term “complete” for the latter—the only relevant one, according to him, for the question of real distinction—while calling a C1 concept “adequate”. For Descartes, only C1 is struck by Arnauld’s objection. Human beings are indeed unable to exclude the divine ‘overdetermination’ of the concepts they possess, hence to be assured of their predicative completeness. On the contrary, the fact that a concept possesses C2—a necessary and sufficient condition for real distinction—falls within the scope of evident human knowledge. Compare now this discussion of Arnauld with his 1686 one with Leibniz on DM 13. Notional completeness is now invoked, not to decide about the mind/body distinction, but about the nature of individual substance and its relation with accidental properties. The overturning of Arnauld’s stance strikes the eye. Against Leibniz, he will defend precisely the view of completeness that Descartes had argued for against him in 1640. For his own part, Leibniz claims the C1 requisite for the true concept of an individual substance. His revaluation of C1-completeness does not mean, however, a return to the pre-Cartesian priority of ‘things’ versus ‘ideas’, but is rather the result of a new approach to things (substances) through the medium of logic and language. The discussion about singular proposition and individual concept shows, how Leibniz’s new science of concepts tries to capture ‘things’ in a manner more adequate than the Cartesian ‘way of ideas’.

Knowing the Individual as Such: Haecceity, and Other Scholastic Tools

Focusing attention on individual substance Leibniz, as I have said, looks back to Aristotle. On the contrary, insofar as he puts the individual concept at the very heart of metaphysical knowledge, he makes a move which deeply subverts the Aristotelian scheme. Though being the basic building-block of the ontological fabric, in fact, the individual as such was practically excluded from the Aristotelian science, which dealt with essences located at the specific level. Leibniz’s conceptualizing of individual seems to break down the old taboo expressed by the dictum: ‘Individuum est ineffabile’.
True, already within the Aristotelian tradition, Scholastic thought, especially since the later Middle Ages, had brought the problems of individuality to the center both of epistemology and ontology. So, in the theories of knowledge of Ockham and Scotus, we have a direct grasp on individual. At the same time, we find in this tradition a great concern for the problem of individuation. More exactly, in the case of nominalistically minded authors like Ockham, the epistemological option for the direct intuition of the individual is accompanied by the refusal of properly posing the ontological problem of the ‘principle of individuation’. Within a conceptual scheme, where we have a direct epistemic access to individuals and only to them, and all there is, is individual, there is no point in asking what makes something an individual; rather, the main problem to be faced is the need to explain how we can get some universal concept. On the contrary, for more generous ontologies, including both individual and universal items, the problem arises. One of the most sophisticated theories of individuation had been worked out by Duns Scotus. In order to determine (‘contract’) the ‘common nature’ to individuality, Scotus, as is well known, introduces a new ontological element, which he labels ‘haecceity’. Leibniz alludes precisely to this famous, but also highly controversial, conceptual tool, in order to illustrate his ‘individual concept’ in DM 8: “God, seeing Alexander’s individual concept or haecceity…”. The hint is the more intriguing, as Leibniz had the opportunity of dealing expressly with the Scotistic concept in his first writing, the dissertation *De principio individui*. But the point is, that he spent there most of his forces just to reject the notion of haecceity as unintelligible. Consistently, Leibniz’s own solution, according to which the individual is individuated through its whole being (*tota sua entitate*), was very close, both from an historical and conceptual point of view, to the nominalistic idea that an individual thing is such immediately, or by itself. In the *Preface* to Nizolius of some years later, Leibniz takes ‘haecceity’ as an example of the obscure Scholastic language he wants to criticize in that work.16

Hence, we cannot help asking whether the reference of DM 8 marks some effective revaluation of Scotus’s technical concept, or rather the term is used in the generic sense of ‘principle of individuation’, to cover something quite different. At the time of the *Discourse*, Leibniz is actually rehabilitating some Scholastic concepts, but he rethinks them in an original way. A proper revaluation of Scotus’s idea is quite unlikely. Anyway, the choice of a term, especially at this strategic juncture, surely is not by chance. What it seems to suggest to

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16 “…certain alchemists…had sounder and clearer insight into the nature of things than did any philosophaster sitting behind closed doors, bent exclusively over his *haecceitates* or his *hocceitates*.” (GP IV 143; L 124). In the same text, Leibniz also criticizes the linguistic form ‘*haecceitas*’, and suggests ‘*hoccitas*’ as more suitable: “The *Hoccitas* will be the reason why something is said to be ‘this’…or the quality of this, insofar as it is a ‘this’.” (GP IV 141).
the reader is the idea that the individuating concept is not a mere sum (or set) of predicates, but a principle of deduction, i.e. something which gives to its owner (God, at least) a key to the intelligibility of the individual. Whereas a complete concept intended as the sum of the individual’s characteristics might rather recall the ‘tota entitate’ of the nominalistically minded youthful solution. For now, I limit myself to remarking that the question about the real sense of the haecceity reference has opened up another question, concerning the internal structure of individual concept. Is it simply a maximal set of predicates, or does it work as a principle of deduction, somehow transcending them?

On the whole, Leibniz is willing to use some Scholastic terms or statements, putting them in a schematic manner, a bit as if they were slogans, apt for expressing some of his own theses in a concise and suggestive manner. This is the case not only with haecceity, but also with a perhaps more exotic piece of the Scholastic way of thinking, i.e. the Thomistic doctrine concerning the individuation of angels. Here also we have, at least at first sight, a contrast with the strategy pursued in the dissertation of 1663. Aquinas’s solutions were left aside there, precisely because they did not offer a unitary account for individuation, holding both for material and immaterial beings. Now, in the Discourse Leibniz advances an absolutely general account, but he is eager to consider it just as the generalization of the solution Aquinas reserved for immaterial beings. All this is stated in section 9, to express the first corollary of the complete concept thesis, which is nothing but the famous ‘principle of the identity of indiscernibles’. From now on, Leibniz’s most famous thesis about identity will be usually accompanied by the ritual reference to Aquinas’s angels. Treating the individual ‘as the infima species’ becomes Leibniz’s characteristic mode of signifying the deep shift which I indicated as ‘conceptualizing the individual’. Once again, reflecting on Leibniz’s use of Scholastic references could help us to grasp his real intention.

In whatever manner we conceive its content, surely the label of ‘haecceity’ indicates that the complete concept is intended by Leibniz to play the role of a principle of individuation. As such, it provides the ultimate ground for the identity assertions concerning individual substances, as the corollary of the identity of indiscernibles has shown.

Substance as a ‘Power of Contraries’ and Leibniz’s Theses about Identity

The first claim about identity which is implied by the complete concept doctrine is the well-known identity of indiscernibles (IdInd) of DM 9. The converse of it, i.e. a very austere thesis of indiscernibility of identicals (IndId), is stated in the following discussion with Arnauld. At the heart of the
discussion about DM 13, Arnauld challenges Leibniz’s idea of the completeness of the individual concept, by arguing that we may conceive counterfactual claims concerning one and the same individual. Hence, no predicate expressing them is included in his/her individual concept. Leibniz’s reply is that such counterfactuals do not reflect the truth of things:

If in the life of some person . . . or even of the universe as a whole, some event were to occur in a different way than it actually does, there would still be nothing to prevent us from saying that this would be another person or another possible universe which God has chosen. And it would in that case be truly another individual.¹⁷

Now, what is the ground for this astonishing thesis? As I have said, it is based on the completeness requirement and containment theory of truth. It is worth noting that this deduction is closely connected, in Leibniz’s exposition, with that of transtemporal identity:

There must . . . also be a reason a priori . . . which justifies us in saying that it is I who was in Paris and that it is also I and not someone else who am now in Germany and that consequently the concept of myself must combine or include these different conditions.¹⁸

Leibniz is willing to endorse the transtemporal identity of substance as a continuant underlying the phenomenon of change while rejecting, instead, the possibility of counterfactual identity. The asymmetric linkage between the two theses is a highly intriguing fact, both for the comparison with the Aristotelian model and for the question of the internal consistency of Leibniz’s theory.

As regards the first point, one of the two theses takes up again some important features of that traditional model, while the other severely challenges it. In order to see this, let us look briefly again at Categories 5. The last part of the chapter indicates as the most characterizing feature of substance that of being “a power of contraries”, i.e. something which is capable of sustaining contradictory predication. A substance, indeed, is now white and then not-white, while remaining one and the same. Reference is made to the all-pervading phenomenon of change. This makes clear that Aristotelian substance at its very origins is the ontological correlate of a weakening of the indiscernibility requirement. The most important feature of substance in Categories 5, in fact, corresponds to the well-known restriction of the ‘principle of contradiction’, as it was formulated by Aristotle himself: “a thing a cannot be B and not-B at

¹⁷ GP II 53 (L. 335).
¹⁸ Ibidem.
the same time and in the same respect.” “At the same time”: but it can be B and not-B at different times, and this is precisely what Categories 5 emphasizes. “In the same respect”: a modal difference could be meant. A thing a is actually B and possibly not-B.

Before going further, let me point out that the other half of the so-called ‘Leibniz’s Law’, i.e. the identity of indiscernibles, was also not suitable to work as an identity condition for Aristotelian substances. In the Aristotelian corpus we find at least an explicit denial of the principle (Metaphysics Z 15), which is all the more significant, insofar as the Stagirite argues there against the possibility of obtaining the knowledge of an individual through a complete description in general terms, hence through conceptual means. As one could easily expect, therefore, Leibniz’s theses about non-temporal identity (IdInd and IndId) show his neat distancing from the Aristotelian substance model, implied by his ‘conceptualization’ of individual. On the other hand, by the same move Leibniz intends to provide a better basis for the this time truly Aristotelian idea of transtemporal sameness.

The asymmetry does not fail to provoke some pressure on the cluster of Leibniz’s theses. The foundation invoked for transtemporal identity, far from supporting the denial of counterfactual identity, could rather reinforce the latter. As some interpreters have observed, in fact, if the properties included in the complete concept are time-indexed, what prevents us from indexing them also to possible worlds? Or, in terms of the ‘Leibniz’s Law’: if we can qualify it by indexing properties to time, why cannot we do the same with worlds? This move seems more available to Leibniz, insofar as he is commonly held as the father of the picture of possible worlds, and his whole discussion with Arnauld about alternative stories is placed in this framework. The point is, however, that Leibniz’s individuals are unequivocally world-bound, as the quotation above has shown. This fact puts us at the center of the most passionate discussions in recent Leibniz literature. But before turning to this, let me briefly recall another ‘paradox’ of DM 9, which has deserved a lot of attention in the literature, and has some important bearing on the identity theses and the view of substance.

‘Connexion des choses’ and Russell’s Internal Relations

From the complete concept theory, DM 9 draws the consequence that an individual substance ‘mirrors’ its whole world, through the circumstance that all its properties, hence also the relational ones, are grounded within its concept. It is well known that Russell considered the alleged reduction of relational predicates the most serious flaw within Leibniz’s theory. When he wrote about Leibniz, he was interested in fighting idealistic monism of the
British variety; and the Leibnizian view on relations appeared to him as a standard example of that ‘doctrine of internal relations’ which would cause the monistic collapse. Under this heading is meant a thesis which considers the relations an individual holds with other individuals (ultimately, with the whole of its world) as something which constitutes its self-same identity. From this perspective, Leibniz’s ‘mirroring thesis’ seems to represent a further powerful ground for the thesis of world-bound individuals (WBI), although it should be clear that the problem of counterfactual identity, and its denial, are conceivable also if one abstracts from the question of relational predicates. As regards the other ‘paradox’ on identity, notice that Leibniz seems to have professed a very strong version of the ldiInd, affirming that any two individuals are internally distinguishable: and this, via the fact that relational properties are founded on monadic ones (in ontological jargon: on intrinsic accidents in the category of quality).

As a matter of fact, the reference to the world context, and to the ‘mirroring thesis’ strikes the eye in the documents of the Arnauld correspondence: the marble block of Geneva, imagined in a counterfactual situation, is said to be numerically different for the imperceptible changes caused in it through the ‘connection of things’. Notice that this connection of things has to be taken in the strongest sense. Leibniz, in fact, does not limit himself to stating that every relational property should have an ‘intrinsic’ foundation. He goes further saying that a change in the relation must somehow affect all related terms. On the contrary, it was commonly accepted in the Aristotelian categorial framework that a relation can change also if one of the related terms does not change. In challenging this principle, Leibniz commits himself, once again, to the abandonment of an intuitive framework for individuals. The paradoxical aspect here is that Leibniz’s strange thesis about changing relations, though presenting itself within an ontological reductionist framework, is more in tune with an extremely ‘realist’ account of relations and ultimately with their irreducibility.19 Once again, this puzzling fact poses the problem of the relation among individual, concept and truth.

Superessentialism without Essence?

During the last decades, an intensive debate has developed about Leibniz’s denial of counterfactual identity, obviously under the influence of present-day discussions concerning the philosophical interpretation of possible worlds

19 This has been remarked by M. Mugnai, Leibniz’s Theory of Relations, Steiner, Stuttgart, 1992, ch. III, 49–55.
semantics. ‘Superessentialism’ is the label coined to designate the view where, if an individual thing were to lack (better, if he had lacked) one of its properties, it simply would not have existed. And this amounts to saying that no counterfactual sentence could be literally interpreted, or in modal terms, that no individual could have different properties than the ones it actually possesses; in the language of possible worlds, finally, that it does exist in no more than one possible world. From this perspective, the contingency of a statement about an individual would reside only in the fact that the statement turns out to be false in all other worlds, in which that individual does not exist; hence, the ‘root of contingency’ would be only the possible non-existence of the individual. A further corollary to this view would be Leibniz’s commitment to a sort of counterpart-theory ante litteram, as it would be documented by his talk about “possible Adams” in the Arnauld correspondence (and about “possible Sextuses” in the final tale of the later *Theodicy*).

This complex of ideas has been variously challenged by several critics, especially insofar as it seems to commit Leibniz precisely to the undesired modal consequences he wanted to avoid in the correspondence. A textual datum should be firstly granted: as a matter of fact, and regardless of terminological questions, Leibniz effectively endorsed the rather astonishing doctrine dubbed above as ‘superessentialism’—i.e., he maintained the denial of counterfactual identity (or, if we prefer, of trans-world identity). The hard work, however, is to understand why he endorsed it, and what the precise import of this doctrine was. A first circumstance that should forewarn us is the fact that Leibniz, surprisingly enough, puts forward the denial of counterfactual identity while he is striving to dispel the allegedly fatalistic implications of the complete concept doctrine feared by Arnauld. Hence, he seems to hold the denial of trans-world identity (TWI) for being relatively independent from, or in any case innocuous to, his defence of contingency. Moreover, while striving to

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counter Arnauld’s charge of ‘fatalism’, he insists on his strange theory of truth. Finally and most surprisingly, the sharp-minded polemical Arnauld does not seem to fear any dangerous modal implication from the denial of TWI and ultimately surrenders to the argument drawn from the truth theory. I find all this a very puzzling story.

Scholars have correctly stressed that the denial of counterfactual identity — differently from what Leibniz himself said — cannot be logically derived from the conceptual containment theory alone.21 None of the supporters of the ‘superessentialist’ reading properly thinks that the denial of TWI can be deduced simply from complete concept, or from its foundation in the conceptual containment theory of truth. For Fabrizio Mondadori himself, for instance, this is only half the story. According to him, in fact, superessentialism stems from the following premises taken together: (1) the individual concept defines the individual, \textit{insofar as it corresponds to the individual essence, or haecceity}; (2) the individual concept is complete. Premise (2) is drawn, in its turn, from (3) the containment theory of truth, insofar as it is applied to singular sentences.22 Let us forget, for the moment, that the application of (3) is likely to presuppose, as I have advised above, an ontological idea of what has to be counted as the subject of a singular proposition, and concentrate rather on (1). Mondadori is eager to specify that the defining role of complete concept does not descend from a merely epistemological problem of individuation; that is, it does not come (simply) from the problem of identifying an individual among the infinite number of actual and possible ones. A \textit{metaphysical} interpretation of the role of complete concept is required, where it represents an ‘individual essence’. I think that this is quite right, but I also think that further inquiry is needed to explain what this postulate means. The substantial issue in the so-called superessentialism debate bears precisely on the understanding of this point.

In order to grasp the problem at stake, I would briefly refer to another distinguished scholar, Benson Mates. He shares with Mondadori the conviction of Leibniz’s commitment to a ‘world bound individuals view’, and the related modal consequences. He seems more perplexed, however, with regard to the Leibnizian reasons for this commitment, and he himself formulates the objection I recalled above of the ‘world indexed concept’. The true difference of approach of the two interpreters in spite of their largely common reading and conclusions lies in the fact that Mates seems to have trouble in making a clear sense of assumption (1). In his reading, rather, the only conjecturable motivation for Leibniz’s embracing of the WBI thesis assumes an unmistakable

\footnote{21 Adams has shown this clearly in \textit{Predication, Truth and Transworld Identity in Leibniz}, trying to give an account of the missing link. My historico-ontological reconstruction will come to confirm some main points of this account.}

\footnote{22 See Mondadori, \textit{Leibniz and the Doctrine of Inter-World Identity}.}
Quinean flavor. According to Mates’s conjecture, Leibniz’s decisive ground for denying TWI could have been the acknowledged impossibility, in view of his principle of continuity of forms, of drawing any intelligible boundary line between the properties of a thing which are, or are not, essential to it.\(^{23}\) I am not interested here in evaluating the merits of Mates’s proposal. In any case, it draws our attention to a fact which risks being unnoticed, maybe because it is somehow masked by the suggestive label of ‘super-essentialism’. I mean, a thesis which effaces the venerable distinction between a privileged subset of properties and a halo of accidental ones could also have some ‘anti-essentialist’ grounds. Surprising as it might be, a kindred train of thought should not be excluded right from the start from the ones available to Leibniz. As regards the notion of necessity, his interpretation of it in terms of what we would consider a linguistic necessity, grounded on meaning, is universally known. And from an ontological point of view, Leibniz’s scholarship in the last decades has shown the influence exerted on him by nominalistic concerns and ideas. Once again, the problem goes back to the way of thinking of the relationship between an object and a concept. If this relationship is thought of as sufficiently loose, it is difficult to give a truly ‘essentialistic’ sense to Leibniz’s ‘superessentialism’.

The same point, or a very similar one, can be grasped from a slightly different perspective. Consider the relationship between the complete concept and transtemporal identity, and the way it was understood in Russell’s book. Differently from Couturat, Russell largely underestimates, at least at the time of writing his book, the ‘analyticity’ seemingly implied by Leibniz’s theory of truth. Therefore he can read Leibniz’s example of the inclusion of a future journey in his concept as amounting to ‘[a] the assertion of permanent substances;…[b] the obvious fact that every proposition about the future is already determined as true or false …’\(^{24}\) Now, a complete notion conceived in this way, i.e. as a set of predicates which is extrinsically stuck to an individual, could hardly explain the denial of counterfactual identity and make a metaphysically relevant sense of ‘superessentialist’ talk. The alleged analyticity, or inclusion of predicates in the concept, would be left with no *de re* import.

**Substantialism without Substrata? Qualities and Bundles**

So far, the difficulty in making sense of the metaphysical import of complete concept seems to amount to the difficulty in making sense of the

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\(^{23}\) See Mates, *Individuals and Modality in the Philosophy of Leibniz*.

connection between the individual and its factual history on one hand, and their
conceptual description on the other. Well, one could suspect that the reason
for Leibniz’s ‘paradoxes’ is just the following: far from presupposing a di-
vorce between the logical (conceptual) and the metaphysical subject, his theses
about identity would reflect precisely the irrelevance of one of the terms, that
is the ontological subject as opposed to concept; or the substance as opposed
to the bundle of qualities. The possibility of attributing such a reductionist
attitude to Leibniz has been sharply envisaged in Russell’s seminal monog-
raphy. Though acknowledging that the historical Leibniz was obviously far
from professing such an attitude—in many occasions he presented his meta-
physics as centered around the notion of substance—Russell held that a
‘bundle theory’ of substance would have been the only coherent ontological
counterpart of the complete concept doctrine. Pursuing decidedly this track,
Robert Yost did not refrain from attributing a kindred bundle theory to the
historical Leibniz himself. For his own part, Strawson in his Individuals argued that the Leibnizian individuation via complete concepts can be made
coherent only at the price of assimilating an individual to the corresponding
concept. Leibniz’s individuating conditions, in fact, would match well with an
ontology of concepts, not of particulars. In this sense, Leibniz’s monadology
would represent the most extreme attempt at giving an ontological framework
in purely general terms (something analogous to Quine’s attempts to parse
away singular terms), and it would be open to the criticism Kant moved in his
Amphiboly to the possibility of a purely conceptual individuation.

For these interpretations, the identity of indiscernibles works as a crucial
test. Exactly as, in present-day discussions, a bundle theory stands or falls with
the necessity of that principle, so the possibility of ascribing to Leibniz such
a reductionist trend is bound to the answer one gives to the question, whether
he regards his famous principle as one holding in all possible worlds, or as a
contingent one, dependent on God’s will. Beside commitment to the necessity
of the IdInd, another objection which is usually raised to bundle theories (or,
on the semantic level, to descriptivist theories of proper names) relies just on
the unpalatable consequence that all true statements about an individual would
result in being analytic truths. But this is precisely the thesis Leibniz seems
to be willing to endorse and from which my questioning stemmed. Also the
IndId, therefore, could be seen as a clue alluding to an underpinning bundle
theoretical approach.

25 Not only in 1686, notice. Think of his defence of the philosophical fruitfulness of substance
against Locke’s criticism of the ‘bare substratum’, in NE II ch. 23.
26 See R. Yost, Leibniz and Philosophical Analysis, Univ. of California Publ. In Philosophy,
Berkeley and Los Angeles, 1954.
My general hypothesis is that Leibniz, on the contrary, was well aware of the need to draw an accurate distinction between the individual and the related concept, or the bundle of its properties, and he was eager to maintain it within his ‘logical’ substance theory. Some interpreters have stressed, in recent years, the need to distinguish conceptual containment from ontological predication in Leibniz.28 I will try to show the parallel development of these two dimensions of predication and truth, which are not blurred nor detached by Leibniz. To understand their connection correctly, we need to grasp his original way of reconciling concept and thing. Finally, we need to explain his final commitment to a ‘conceptual’ individuation of substances, despite this attention to the thing-concept distinction.

The implicit adherence to a qualitativist ontology could also work as a motivation for embracing a Lewisian-style theory of individuation. The primacy of quality, which amounts to the absolute submission of numerical identity to indiscernibility, can be applied also to the transtemporal case; in Lewis’s words: “this [counterfactual] sameness is no more a literal identity than the sameness between you today and you tomorrow.”29 In present-day debates, the acceptance of TWI from the modal viewpoint mainly corresponds to a traditional view of temporal persistence, while the counterpart theoretical approach matches well with the substitution of the traditional ‘continuant’ by a construction built from temporal parts. Leibniz’s asymmetric handling of counterfactual and transtemporal identity seems to imply a corresponding stance at the level of ontological options, insofar as it would match well with a rather traditional view of continuant on one hand, and with a qualitativist approach to modal individuation on the other.

Things are more complicated, however. The passages where Leibniz seems to share a reductionist (if we prefer, a constructivist) attitude to substance, or at least to seriously contemplate its possibility, are to be found precisely within the context of analyses of transtemporal identity and change, indeed. On the other hand, we could also find passages where, from the modal point of view, Leibniz envisages the construction of possible worlds through counterfactual variations of the actual one. True, one might suppose that this approach reflects only the point of view of our finite knowledge. In any case, the ontology

implied by the complete concept view and related theses about identity should be not taken too much for granted. Leibniz seems to move, rather, on the boundary between two alternative and internally coherent clusters of interrelated ontological intuitions.

Anyway, both a qualitativist ontology and a theory of subject intended as a ‘bare substratum’ or ‘bare particular’ are bound to the impossibility to provide an adequate basis for modal claims. Aristotelian essentialism, on the contrary, provides such a basis at the cost of holding that the world is built of individuals-with-properties, and some properties are on a quite different ontological level from others, insofar as they identify what the individual is. But this was precisely the work done in the Categories model by sortals or ‘second substances’ and by the first way of predication i.e. the relation of being-said-of as distinguished from that of ‘being-in’: that is, by these elements in the Categories account that have been left out in the Leibnizian reshaping. Thus, it remains uncertain whether Leibniz’s indisputable profession of ‘superessentialism’ is to be intended as an extreme strengthening of the essentialist claim, or rather as a consequence of its weakening. The risk of anachronism always lurking in this type of consideration, and Leibniz’s anxiety of connecting his ideas to the most traditional ones, should not obscure, in my opinion, how much his attempt at rethinking substance was really unprejudiced and problematic.

What has been evoked so far is sufficient to confirm how Leibniz is an exceptional fellow-traveller for people engaged in the substance debate in the analytical tradition. But this, and the questions raised about his commitment to an essentialist substance theory, can be appreciated and, respectively, answered only in the historical background of an age when such problems were radically debated. The search for a new theory of substance, putting the old Aristotelian idea on a new basis, has to be understood in the background of the giants’ paradigm battle I have alluded to above, that is to say, nothing less than a deep rethinking of the conceptual framework governing the relationship of things, concepts and language. This is the story I will try and tell in the following pages.