Ohad Nachtomy, *Possibility, Agency, and Individuality in Leibniz's Metaphysics*. Dordrecht: Springer, 2007.

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1. Nachtomy's Leibniz: The metaphysical Aufbau *of our world*

Leibniz's leading idea of a combinatorial reconstruction of the world, starting from the first elements of thought and reality, has sometimes been compared to twentieth century logically–minded *Aufbau* projects. The latter, however, are animated by a robust anti–metaphysical concern, whereas the former displays a full-blown metaphysical insight – or an ultra-metaphysical one, as a good deal of this story develops within God's essence (or at least his understanding).

The construction of a world out of the material of simple concepts (or 'forms') is usually taken by interpreters as little more than a program (if not a dream), whose realization has proven to be far from a linear one. Nachtomy's book, on the contrary, tries to take the idea seriously; it outlines, indeed, a complete reconstruction of Leibniz's metaphysics from the bottom up – 'synthetically', we might say – i.e. from the material of *possibilia* in God's mind up to individual concepts/substances and further on to the world of bodies. Nachtomy is well aware of the different ontological levels and the crucial steps (if not gaps) one comes across when moving from one to another. He engages himself, however, in a basically continuistic interpretation, providing a rationale for all controversial steps. Moreover, according to his interpretation Leibniz's view is consistent also in a chronological respect. While other readings try to deal with the inner tensions in Leibniz's thought by relying on a genetic reconstruction, Nachtomy emphasizes some fundamental strands of continuity. The resulting picture is a strongly systematic one – going against an important stream in recent Leibniz scholarship – though being far from 'flat', emphasizing on the contrary the different levels and dimensions of the Leibnizian world.

In practice, Nachtomy tackles with a fresh look the whole material Leibniz scholars are familiar with, and tries to reinterpret it, putting to the test some of the most controversial interpretative issues, for which he is prepared to give some (more or less) new solutions from his perspective. Let me briefly sketch his itinerary, as it unfolds in ten concise and very clear chapters.

The first part of the book, devoted to 'Possibility' (Ch. 1-4), is concerned with

God's understanding, the well–known '*pays des possibles*'. Nachtomy sketches a combinatorial construction starting from simple *possibilia* – the latter being clearly taken merely as concepts in God's mind, according to a (largely understood) conceptualist approach. In this part, he makes use of the scattered remarks on God and forms in Leibniz's Paris notes. The main problem, to which Nachtomy rightly points, is to give an account of the genesis of individual concepts, starting from the stock of general ones. Notice that he assumes – according to his (Leibniz's) ontologically deflationary bent – a rather common reading, according to which possible individuals are simply equated to complete concepts. Another decisive step leads us from individual concepts to the building of possible worlds. According to Nachtomy, the complete concept of an individual properly arises only at the level of possible worlds, where relations among individuals are taken into account. I shall consider these two steps more closely below.

   In the second part ('Agency') the inquiry comes to the field of actuality. Given the reading of the complete concept as a kind of mathematical-like 'law of the series' – allowing it to play the role of a true 'genetic definition' – actualization is interpreted, plausibly enough, as the creation of a corresponding force (or substantial form) which unfolds in time. I find the emphasis on this double dimension – the tenseless one of the complete concept in God's mind, and the temporal one of the embodied force – very appropriate. Less convincing, in my opinion, is the attempt at finding room for freedom, by interpreting the 'program' contained in the complete concept in a properly prescriptive sense, as distinct from a descriptive (admittedly, a prognostic) one. While it is true that 'reasons' are taken by Leibniz as 'inclining grounds', we find in his writings no clear–cut distinction between their objective–normative value as reasons, and the psychological weight they can assume, as a matter of fact, as motives, working in a determinist way. In any case, the 'certain determination' Leibniz has in mind does exclude the real possibility of a 'branching' in a course of actions.

   In general, the concept of 'agency' used by Nachtomy in this part – playing a somewhat ambiguous role between the metaphysical one of 'activity' and the moral one of 'action' – might be better delimited. Nachtomy's characterization in Chapter 5 stresses the belonging of action to an individual subject – which is in any case a general metaphysical feature of each form of activity. Nachtomy rightly also points out how 'activity', when taken in its metaphysical sense, has to be carefully distinguished from the purely logical process of deduction; and this is the problem lying behind Spinoza's ontology of divine (self-)production.

According to Nachtomy, the gap between the geometric model and activity can be somehow filled, if our geometrical model is not demonstration, but construction, hence genetic definiton. We should be careful, however, in distinguishing this type of production from a rational one. Remember that God, according to Spinoza, if taken at the level of '*natura naturans*', does not have any understanding – 'divine understanding' amounting to nothing but the infinite chain of ideas, considered as modes of the attribute Thought. Hence, I think that the label of 'rational agent' is inappropriate for describing Spinoza's God.

Finally, the last part of the book ('Individuality') is concerned with the level of corporeal substances. Surprisingly enough, the label of 'individuality' is reserved to this part, even if it already plays an important role in the earlier parts. Here also, Nachtomy's approach is a strenuously coherentist one. Interpreters usually think that Leibniz's attention is focused on individuality in the 1686 theory of substance, where the paradigmatic examples of individual substance are human persons – if not, more properly, their souls: Alexander, or 'Alexander's soul'. From the second part of Arnauld's correspondence onward, instead, attention would be shifted to the problem of bodies and the simplicity (or at least the indivisibility) requirement for substancehood – a quite different one from individuality, indeed. To sum up, it is usually taken for granted that the *locus* for individuality is the theory of the complete concept discussed in the first part of Arnauld's correspondence, whereas, when discussing corporeal composite substances, some quite different concerns and features would come to the fore. Nachtomy's approach, on the contrary, shows a sustained attempt at building bridges between the complete concept theory and later complex accounts of corporeal substance.

Here also, Nachtomy might have looked for further textual evidence to sustain his attempt. He might have called attention to those hints, where Leibniz connects – admittedly, rather cryptically – his theory of the individual concept with his criticism of the Cartesian extended substance. Here, Leibniz challenges extension not for its being made by parts external to parts, but for its being not able to dominate changes in the history of a thing and give an account of them. These hints might support Nachtomy's final insight, according to which the decisive sense of simplicity would not lie in the absence of parts, but in the indivisible unity of a law of development.

While trying not to get too involved in the controversial issues concerning corporeal substances, Nachtomy professes an alleged middle stance, mainly modeled on Rutherford's interpretation, where the acknowledgment of a weakened

ontological status of matter is accompanied by rejection of frankly phenomenistic insights. That is to say, matter is ontologically diminished not insofar as its reality would be a phenomenal (in the sense of mind-dependent[1]) one, but insofar as it is a 'being of aggregation', dependent on some more basic unities.

Nachtomy, however, accords decisive importance to the distinction between aggregates on one hand, and organic beings on the other, and this makes his stance much closer to the corporeal substance theorists. In particular, he takes on Fichant's topic of the '*machines de la nature*', which he develops and reinterprets through his model of 'nested individuality'.

According to this model, in each true individual substance other individual substances are 'nested', and so on to infinity. Nachtomy is careful to avoid a 'mereological' interpretation. Thus, he stresses the need of distinguishing between the relation of 'to be nested in' and that of 'to be part of', or spatial inclusion. In any case, the view of the 'descent with no bottom' through hierarchically nested structures fully corresponds to the commonly labeled 'middle years' view, as opposed to the monadological one.

The notion of activity links the topic of the complete concept to that of nested individuals. Nachtomy, indeed, tries to interpret the Leibnizian notion of 'dominance' in the sense of a hierarchical subordination of the activities of the nested individuals to the over–ruling finalistic principle of their organization. As he observes, the difficult point is to give an account of the 'activation' of (causally autonomous) subordinate entelechies by the dominant one. To make sense of this, on one hand, he figures out the inclusion of sub–programs within the dominant rule – an interesting speculative suggestion. On the other hand, he is dissatisfied with the explanation of dominance relation as an expressive or representative one. This seems to me, however, Leibniz's one way to feature it – unless when he explicitly, but problematically, tests the need, and the possibility, of some stronger 'substantial' bond.

2. Construing Individuals: Within and Beyond the Standard Reading

Particularization

As I have hinted above, Nachtomy rightly emphasizes the significance – as well as the problems – of the shift from the set of simple forms to individual concepts.

Now, the standard reconstruction of Leibniz's theory of the complete concepts

of individual substances presents two general aspects, which constitute also, in my view, their interpretative limitations: a) the standard reconstruction concentrates on *concepts*, without considering the ontological reality of the individual, as something distinct both from concept and from its own properties – the latter being expressed in the concept itself. Of course, people well know that concepts (at least in the case of actual individuals) do have individuals as counterparts, and that properties/accidents are referred to a substance; this substantial element, however, does not contribute to intelligibility, but remains as a somewhat obscure ontological assumption; 2) the logical reading of the complete concept (finding its definite classical form at least after Mates' seminal articles) takes it as a set of a) *general* concepts, b) resulting by their logical conjunction. Now, these conceptual tools surely help to clarify some informal (and vague enough) notions (by translating them in our logical grammar) and also to connect them to the wider 'Leibnizian' project of logico–philosophical analysis. Nevertheless, they could hardly capture all the metaphysical assumptions of Leibniz's discourse.

Nachtomy, for his own part, shares to a large extent attitude (1). Exactly the *Paris Notes* he largely makes use of, however, might offer significant evidence of the fact that Leibniz was well aware of the importance of the ontological dimension of subject, as distinct from 'forms': "Mira res, aliud esse subjectum aliud esse formas" (*De Formis seu Attributis Dei*, A VI.3, 514). And this Leibnizian reflection, I believe, might shed further light on the problems of the compatibility among his forms and of the construction of individual concepts, starting from the case of God to arrive at finite things.

Nachtomy challenges, instead, (2) the standard picture of the inner structure of the complete concept. More exactly, he still follows the standard reading in assuming (2a) that the basic ingredients of individual concepts are *general* concepts. This seems to go without saying; after all, all reasonable concepts are general, the problem being rather to make sense of individual – i.e. not pluri–instantiable – concepts. The difficult point, however, is exactly how to get such a concept by using general ones as building blocks – and this difficulty was already familiar to Aristotle.

At a point, Nachtomy describes the particularization process as if it would simply amount to the increase of complexity within an intensional approach. This catches an important aspect of Leibniz's intuition; but maybe it is also a rather expected (the idea of the inverse relationship extension/comprehension was a common one) and unsatisfying one. Why should maximal complication assure non-replicability?

Moreover, starting from one stock of simple elements, it is also difficult to give an account of the formation of different sets. To be sure, there are literal statements, one of them being quoted by Nachtomy[2], according to which individuals do simply correspond to all combinations of simple forms. But this should already presuppose a series of modifications (at least through the intervention of negation) of the basic elements which are the ingredients of God's essence and the first possibilities. Nachtomy in part fills this gap between the set of simple forms and their infinite particularizations by relying on the concept of order and on the role played by the unifying law as something over and above the sum of predicates, as we shall see.

As a matter of fact, we find in Leibniz some hints to a subtler (though also elusive) approach to the problem of particularization. Consider, for instance, a text like the *De Cogitationum Analysi* from the end of the Seventies, where this theme is closely bound to the subject/properties distinction: "The subject and the attribute seem to result from the fact that the concept of one *individual* is involved in the concept of the other. I can well conceive of heat, even if I do not conceive of any hot thing, but I cannot conceive of *this heat* if I do not take into account some hot thing." (A VI.4, 2770).

Considering the ontological background of the logical theory of predication, and distinguishing it from the conceptual side, would permit one to better take into account Leibniz's ontological particularism, especially when referring to (individual) accidents. This is an aspect rooted in the Nominalist tradition, of which Nachtomy is certainly aware. Of course, the issue would still be open, of connecting the ontological level – where we have to do only with *individual* accidents – to the conceptual one. To be sure, the Identity of Indiscernibles is mainly handled by Leibniz considering general concepts as the ingredients of the individual ones. But we might ask, whether this is valid also at the level of *divine* concepts – finally, where individual concepts are properly located. Leibniz's texts, however, might allow us only a speculative reading in this respect.

The Unifying Law

Nachtomy parts company from the standard reading when considering (2b) the logical operations which should generate an individual concept. While the standard reading takes complete concepts as a mere set of predicates, he correctly emphasizes, first of all, the need of attributing a more complex structure to them.

In practice, conceptual analysis (better, synthesis) should take into account the

relation of order, transforming a set into an ordered sequence. I fully agree with this insight. The consideration of the order relations (*ordo naturae*), which dominate Leibniz's logic of conditions (*requisita*) and are well documented in many of his drafts of categorial analysis, is decisive, especially in order to spell out the structure of (possibly) existing things. To grasp this, consider the peculiar nature of the predicates which a complete concept should reflect: that is to say, the series of states of an individual substance, disposed in a causal–temporal order.

More fundamentally, Nachtomy is eager to acknowledge in complete concepts something over and above the sequence of predicates, a principle of deduction from which the latter can be drawn. To get this result, he insists on the interpretation of the concept as a rule, determining the series of predicates.

Actually, I think, this is the only way to give a non–trivial sense to the whole talk about individual concepts[3]. On the other hand, it is far from clear whether Leibniz had the logical tools to capture these aspects in his logic of concepts (such as it was developed, e.g., in the contemporaneous *Generales Inquisitiones*). Moreover, Leibniz especially encouraged the 'set-of-concepts' reading in some contexts – like the great discussion with Arnauld – where he ultimately weakens the inner links of the complete concept in order to avoid undesired modal consequences.

Complete concepts and relations: thin and thick concepts

A great deal of attention is devoted by Nachtomy to another type of inner articulation of the complete concept – between the core set of monadic properties on one hand, and the set of relational predicates on the other. Of course, the background to this distinction is the intricate issue of Leibniz's treatment of relations and relational properties. On the whole, Nachtomy accepts Mugnai's seminal assessment of the problem: hence, the distinction between logical analysis and ontological assumptions, and the standard Scholastic view of relations as something objective, but supervening on individuals and their properties simply through their being 'thought–of–together'. Moreover, he subscribes to Mugnai's claim that relations are included in the individual's *concept*. There are actually several passages – Nachtomy refers especially to those of the correspondence with Arnauld – which unequivocally show, how relations play an important role in individuation *via* complete concepts.

Within this framework, recent interpreters have advanced a distinction between a 'thin' and a 'thick' version of the individual concept, marked by the respective

absence and inclusion of relational predicates[4]. This distinction can be variously used: for instance (by Cover and Hawthorne[5]) to construe a 'way out' from super-essentialism, making a variety of TWI possible. The same distinction is now vigorously adopted by Nachtomy. He does not look for any modal payoff from it; in general, he seems to prudently abstain from any discussion about counterfactual non-identity. Rather, the distinction serves him to give an account of the construction of possible worlds in God's mind. In particular, he tries to contrast Catherine Wilson's[6] holistic thesis, according to which the concept of a whole world is prior to the concept of a possible individual – the latter being abstracted from the former. According to Nachtomy, each individual has his/her own characterizing set of monadic properties; but this is, still, only an incomplete concept. Only when God considers all these concepts (i.e. these possible individuals) together, relational properties result; and with these, the concept of a possible world *and* the complete individual concept *simultaneously* arise: only the last concept, notice, being a truly *individual* one.

Nachtomy's main contribution here is the interesting and suggestive introduction of the notion of 'logical space'[7], where each possible individual is located. I am not fully clear, however, about the relation between this suggestion and the distinction above: that is to say, does the logical space already determine the place of the *incomplete* possible individual, or is it constituted only at the second step? The question is relevant, especially as far as the notion of 'space' is taken in its full import, i.e. as a framework which is not only determined by, but essentially determines each of its contents. And this is the crucial point, finally, in order to appreciate the relevance of the distinction at hand: I mean, in order to know exactly how the thin and the thick concepts are related.

In her discussion with Nachtomy, Wilson had emphasized how difficult it is – in itself, and in Leibniz too – to draw a clear-cut distinction between monadic and relational properties. Against this remark, Nachtomy here forcefully argues in favor of the indispensability of making sense of this distinction in the traditional ontological framework, accepted by Leibniz himself. The need of grounding 'external demominations' on 'internal' ones is an indisputable and crucial tenet of Leibiz's stance, indeed.

Consider, however, the illuminating distinction – and, at the same time, the tight connection – between causal autonomy on one hand, and conceptual connection on the other, which Nachtomy himself emphasizes. If one considers, too, that the true accidents at stake are infinitely complex states, having a perceptual nature, then

the issue might take on a slightly different aspect. It might be actually tempting to think that, in Leibniz's view, all properties are ultimately rigorously monadic from an ontological point of view, while at the same time being relational from a semantic, or conceptual point of view: in the sense that their possession by the individual already reflects his/her belonging to a certain world, where such–and–such individuals are included.

Anyway, it seems that the important distinction to be drawn would rather be, once again, that between the individual and his/her concept – and the related one between ontological inherence on one hand, and conceptual inclusion on the other. On the contrary, the one here invoked between a thin and a thick concept turns out to be somehow elusive, or at least – though wholly legitimate and also required – not so decisive for the interpretative issues to which it is applied. Thus Mugnai, after considering this selfsame distinction[8], appropriately observes: "Any difference between the two [descriptions] vanishes because … Leibniz thinks that through any perception whatsoever of an individual substance 'a reader endowed with infinite discernment may read the entire universe'." But if the whole universe can be drawn from the consideration of one substance only, the distinction above between 'incomplete' and 'complete' concepts looses to a large extent its supposed relevance. Mugnai concludes: "The concept of expression blurs any border between a realistic and a nominalistic (or conceptualistic) account of relations, and this explains Leibniz's typical carelessness to distinguish the two different accounts…"[9]

The quotation calls attention to a crucial test for measuring the adequacy of an account of Leibniz's view about relations. All interpreters who have insisted on the thin/thick distinction, indeed, reason as if changes in the relational properties of a substance S 'supervene' or 'result' by comparing S to other individuals, S *remaining unchanged in itself*. Also Nachtomy's efficacious example of the three letters[10] assumes that the change in the relational properties of one of these letters could happen without any internal change, according to a venerable tradition in the philosophy of relations.

This is not Leibniz's view, however. As is well–known (but not so often taken seriously), indeed, he expressly says that an observer acute enough could read off *from one individual only* the whole world to which it belongs. Moreover, he endorses the wholly counter–intuitive thesis, according to which each change in an extrinsic denomination would imply an intrinsic change *in each of the relata*.[11] Surely, it is not easy to give an account of this Leibnizian stance. But simply emphasizing the possibility of isolating an invariable core of inner monadic predicates risks missing

an important 'holistic' aspect of Leibniz's intuition.

    These remarks, of course, do not mean to diminish the value of Nachtomy's work. Rather, they offer some reflections on some difficult and controversial interpretative issues, which have been provoked, once more, by Nachtomy's acute and stimulating reconstruction. The merit of this historically well–informed and philosophically penetrating book is to bring, once again in a fresh manner, Leibniz's problems and his solutions close to our intellectual present, while nevertheless locating them in their original framework.

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Notes

[1] At most, such would be its unity.

[2] See AVI.4, 306, quoted by Nachtomy, Chapter 2, page 52.

[3] For more explicit presentation of the individual concept as a principle of deduction, see the *Notationes Generales* (A VI.4, 553) and the passage in the *Remarques* for a letter to Arnauld (then omitted in the letter actually sent) on the primitive core of the complete concept (GP II 44).

[4] This can be seen as a special version of the 'core set' view (see note 2 above), not to be confused with the nomological one (primitive law, from which the other predicates are derived), with which it can well combine, however (as in Nachtomy's case).

[5] In their *Substance and Individuation in Leibniz*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1999.

[6] For this discussion, see C. Wilson, *Plenitude and Compossibility in Leibniz*. The Leibniz Review, 10, 2000, pp. 1–20, and Nachtomy's reply, *Individuals, Worlds and Relations: A Discussion of Catherine Wislon's 'Plenitude and Compossibility in Leibniz'*. The Leibniz Review, 11, 2001, pp. 117–125.

[7] See on this also *The Individual's Place in Logical Space: Leibniz on Possible Individuals and their Relations*. Studia Leibnitiana, 30, 1998, pp. 161–177.

[8] Nachtomy quotes him, but he omits the conclusion of Mugnai's reasoning, which

I report here.

[9] Mugnai 2001, *Leibniz on Individuation: From the Early Years to the* 'Discourse' *and Beyond*, Studia Leibnitiana XXXIII, 2001, pp. 53–54.

[10] See Nachtomy 2007, Ch. 3, page 98.

[11] See NE II; Ch. 25: "PHILAL.: 'Il peut y avoir un changement de relation, sans qu'il arrive aucun changement dans le sujet. Titius, que je considère ajourd'hui comme père, cesse de l'être demain, sans qu'il se fasse aucun changement en lui, par cela seul que son fils vient à mourir'. THEOPH.: 'Cela se peut bien dire suivant les choses, dont on s'apperçoit; quoyque dans la rigueur metaphysique il soit vray, qu'il n'y a point de denomination entièrement exterieure...'" GP V 210–211; *Definitiones*: "… denominationes extrinsecae, quae scilicet nascuntur, et pereunt nulla subjecti mutatione, sed tantum, quia fit mutatio in alio, ita pater fit pater nato filio etsi ipse qui forte in India Orientali agit, non afficiatur…"; but he continues: "Fatendum tamen interim rigorose nullam esse denominationem extrinsecam in rebus, quia nihil contingit ullibi in mundo, quod non omnia in Mundo existentia reapse afficiat…", and in the margin: "Re recte expensa videtur impossibile ut aliqua propositio de aliquo fiat falsa, nulla in eo facta mutatione. Nimirum Mundus est quasi unum, et unaquaeque res aliarum omnium mutatione afficitur realiter.", A VI. 4, 308. See also *De termino, praedicato, relatione*, A Vi.4, 944; and the Notes to Temmik: "Imo ob connexionem rerum universalem differt intrinsecis qualitatibus Monarcha Sinarum cognitus mihi a se ipso mihi nondum cognito." (VE 1086; published also in M. Mugnai, *Leibniz's Theory of Relations*, Appendix 4, italics mine).