

**J. A. Cover and John O’Leary-Hawthorne, *Substance and Individuation in Leibniz*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999. Pp. x + 307.**

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This is one of the most philosophically interesting books on Leibniz published in the last years: it is highly rewarding not only for Leibniz scholars, but also for people interested in typical issues of contemporary analytic philosophy like transworld identity (TWI), the identity of indiscernibles, the contrast between *suchness* and *thisness*, etc. It is even a quite demanding book: clearly written and well argued, it discusses at length, in rigorous analytical style, many philosophical topics, raising several questions and suggesting original answers.

The book begins recalling some central features of Leibniz’s early work on *the Principle of Individuation* (1663), taking occasion to emphasize the main requirements that the scholastic tradition usually imposed on the nature of the individuating principle. The most relevant among these requirements is that what individuates has to be *internal* to the individuated thing. It follows from this that *relations* and relational properties cannot belong to the set of individuating properties characteristic of a given substance. Resuming the essential features of a debate on the nature of relations in Leibniz which began with Bertrand Russell and developed through recent years, Cover and O’Leary Hawthorne (henceforth ‘C&O’) separate, in the first place, the ontological issue concerning relations from the strictly logical and syntactic one. Analyzing Leibniz’s claims on the nature of relations, they arrive at the conclusion that, for Leibniz, relations “supervene” on the related individuals with their individual non-relational accidents (properties). Thus, if Paris loves Helen (Leibniz’s example), the relation of “loving” which subsists between them supervenes once Paris and Helen exist with their internal states and representations. Therefore, if for Leibniz what individuates each individual substance is its complete concept, the complete concept cannot include relations, but only the intrinsic “monadic” properties on which relations are grounded (i. e. the properties on which they supervene).

The supervenience theory of relations may be supported by good textual evidence, even though C&O do not state this explicitly. The Latin verb “supervenire” appears in Thomas and Scotus and was widely used by late scholastic authors with a meaning analogous to the one it has in contemporary philosophical debates. Antonius Goudin, for instance, uses it in his *Logic* (Bononiae, 1686, p.

328), writing of a relation which *supervenies* without altering or disposing otherwise the subject on which it supervenes. Leibniz, however, prefers to use the Latin verb “resultare” (to result), but one may easily show that he attributes to this verb the same meaning as “supervenire”.

Once inter-monadic relations have been stripped out from complete concepts, C&O proceed to draw from their austere idea of individuation interesting consequences for Leibniz’s metaphysics. The first one is that of proposing a kind of “essentialism” compatible with the possibility, for the very same individual, of being in different possible worlds. In a letter dated April 16, 1715 Des Bosses asks Leibniz if God “could not create any one of these monads which thus exist without constructing all the others which equally exist now”. Leibniz’s answer is that God “can do it absolutely; he cannot do it hypothetically, because he has decreed that all things should function most wisely and harmoniously”. As Leibniz further explains: “There would be no deception of rational creatures, however, even if everything outside of them did not correspond exactly to their experiences, or indeed if nothing did, just as if there were only one mind”. C&O quote other passages in which Leibniz makes the same claim, stating that what they want from Leibniz’s replies is “his commitment to a consistent pair—a modally strong separability requirement and a modally weak correspondence thesis” (p. 102). Stating that God can create only a monad, Leibniz supports the traditional thesis that one of the main features of an individual substance is its *separability*. From Leibniz’s answer, at the same time, it follows that pre-established harmony is contingent, not necessary. From the requirement of separability and from contingency of pre-established harmony, C&O then argue that nothing prevents Leibniz from allowing that *the same individual* exists in different worlds (thus negating the claim that individual substances are world-bound): “You are a substance, and co-exist with other substances at this world. If [...] every world at which you exist is a world at which they exist, then your existence is not independent of their existence. But you are a substance, really distinct from them, and your existence does not depend upon theirs. Hence there is a world where you exist but they not. Thus you are not a world-bound individual” (p. 102). Essential to each individual substance are its internal states—its perceptions—not the relations that it bears to the other monads which are connected by God to its internal states and perceptions.

Assuming, however, that the same individual substance may be instantiated in different worlds, one seems to be forced to assume that the same set of internal

representations of this substance may be put in relation with different individuals. Thus, if for instance Paris loves Helen in the actual world and a different woman at another world, his internal representations which here are connected with his love for Helen must remain unchanged even in the other world. (This is an obvious consequence of Paris being the same individual in the other world). This conclusion, however, seems to be in contrast with what Leibniz states about perceptions, internal representations and expressions. It is well known, indeed, that for Leibniz perceptions and internal representations are *expressions* of the entire world, each representation of a given individual substance expressing *the whole set* of individual substances belonging to the same world. Hence, if each representation expresses its entire environment, as it were, it seems that no room is left for the case of the same set of representations being connected to, or “intentioning”, two (or more) different objects. It is precisely at this point, however, that, for C&O, the above-mentioned contingency of pre-established harmony comes into play. If each individual substance is in itself “a world apart”, then no representation of such a substance has “written in itself” to what individual or individuals it has to correspond. No internal representation brings with itself a fixed reference to a given substance and not to another. Therefore, the relation of *expression* and the correlated pre-established harmony is something accommodated by God: pre-established harmony “is a relation secured by God creating the right kind of simple substances in the first place” (p. 53). Pre-established harmony “is not properly understood in terms of relational accidents in substances, but rather as a general truth (a very long conjunction perhaps) decreed by God in his creation of the best world” (p. 74). A central claim of C&O’s interpretation is that Leibniz’s account of perception as expression does not imply an “overt commitment to the things that are perceived, nor even to there being something that is perceived at all.” In C&O’s own words: perceptual states “of Leibnizian substances are monadic: that they count as *expressions of* a thing outside it cannot be gotten from anything intrinsic to that state, and they count as such only insofar as a pre-established harmony guarantees that they correspond in suitable ways with monadic states of other substances”. Pre-established harmony, in this case, “is a general fact about our world that supervenes on the primitive monadic facts of our world.” (p. 98)

It seems to me, however, that Leibniz’s answer to Des Bosses (and the other texts alluded to by C&O) admits a quite different reading. Speaking of the possibility that only a monad exists, Leibniz appears to refer to what scholastic thinkers named *the absolute power* of God. On the basis of his absolute power,

God may create only one monad: this is something “possible in itself” (not implying any contradiction), but it is impossible under the hypothesis of God’s wisdom. And this properly means that a world consisting of only one monad is *de facto* impossible. As in other parts of Leibniz’s philosophy, we are faced here with a necessity *ex hypothesi* (properly speaking, with a “moral necessity”): given God’s wisdom it is impossible that a solipsistic world made of a single monad could ever exist.

The case that the same internal representation may correspond to different individuals correlated with that representation is explicitly discussed by Leibniz in the *New Essays*, in a passage to which C&O do not refer, but which, at first glance, seems to supplement their claim with good evidence: “[...] although every outer appearance is grounded in the inner constitution, it can nevertheless happen that two different constitutions result in the same appearance; yet there will be something in common, and that is what philosophers call the ‘immediate formal cause’” (NE, 309)). Thus, if Paris loves Helen in our world and Helen\* in another, his internal representation of a woman made so-and-so, connected with his act of love, may remain the same in the two worlds. To make this case possible it is required only that Helen and Helen\* share a set of properties in common to constitute the ‘immediate formal cause’ of the sameness of the representation. To imagine this is not too difficult if one thinks of Helen\* to be only slightly different from Helen. In this case, it would be God who, connecting the internal state S of Paris with Helen in our world, determines the harmonious and expressive character of S: from the internal state S of Paris there would be a fixed correspondence with Helen in our world. As remarked above, the Leibnizian *expression* becomes, in C&O’s hands, something *external*, as it were, *superadded* by God to the internal representational states of the individual substances. But in this account of expression, it becomes difficult to interpret what Leibniz properly means when he writes that from the internal states of each individual substance, thanks to their expressive character, “a reader endowed with infinite discernment may read the entire universe” (G 2, 278). It seems to me that the fact that God—recurring to his absolute power—may attribute to a monad a set of internal appearances in the absence of real objects which correspond to them, *does not imply* that the internal states of each monad are intrinsically non-relational.

C&O dub “strong” the kind of essentialism they attribute to Leibniz. Strong essentialism may be considered the conjunction of two claims: 1) *x*’s complete individual concept specifies *x*’s singular nature; 2) all intrinsic monadic properties

are part of the singular nature of each individual substance. From this follows that an individual could not have fallen under a different complete concept; but this does not entail the denial of TWI. What strong essentialism entails is that “for any  $x$ ,  $x$  has the same complete concept at any world at which  $x$  exists. But that is neutral with respect to the claim that  $x$  exists at more than one world, and so is consistent with it” (p. 94). To preserve strong essentialism and TWI, however, C&O free complete concepts from any intrinsic relational feature which “brings into them” some reference to the external world. Thus, they suggest that for Leibniz laws of nature are not “written into” each complete concept (God may “read off” the laws of nature through the complete concepts, but they are not included in the complete concept) (p. 107). Accordingly, C&O claim that the relational truths about a given individual at a world follow from the complete concept of this very individual “in conjunction with the global laws of nature describing the sequence of harmonious changes in substances at that world” (p. 105). And laws of nature at the actual world, as happens for inter-monadic relations supervene on the set of intrinsic monadic histories at the actual world” (p. 109).

As C&O remark, because of his essentialism Leibniz “is committed to the intelligibility of *de re* modal ascriptions”: thus, according to Robert Kaplan’s well-known taxonomy, he has to be classified as an *haecceitist*. Yet “various strands of his thought exert significant pressures toward an anti-haecceitist view” (p. 144 ff.). Given a singular proposition of the type “ $a$  is  $F$ ”—where “ $a$ ” is a proper name—usually Leibniz associates a complete concept with “ $a$ ”, offering an analysis of the singular proposition in term of a sentence taking the logical form “The thing that is  $F$  and  $G$  and  $H$  ... is  $F$ ”. In other words, Leibniz appears to consider proper names as “mere shorthand for definite descriptions”. This, however, even though compatible with essentialism, seems to favor a *de dicto* interpretation of Leibniz’s modal claims about individuals. But purely general propositions do not have the resources for “tracking a particular object across lists of worlds: therefore the concept of transworld identity, and with it the traditional *de re* modal notions of essence and accident, have been lost” (p. 147). Moreover, interpreting Leibniz’s modal claims as *de dicto* seems to damage the validity of the principle of identity of indiscernibles (“Pii”), that Leibniz accepts. At the same time, the other great principle of Leibniz’s metaphysics—that of sufficient reason (“Ps $r$ ”)—seems to require *haecceitism*.

To reconcile these diverging aspects of Leibniz’s philosophy, C&O propose a kind of haecceitism that they call “weak”. A characteristic feature of “weak

haecceitism” is that it admits singular propositions that supervene on general propositions: given any singular proposition P, “if P is true at a world, then there is some set of general propositions at that world whose truth is sufficient for P”. Weak haecceitism “can admit that a set of singular propositions at a world uniquely fixes the general truths there” (p. 160). Thus weak haecceitism accepts TWI “as a function of general truths at worlds”. In this way, “the concept of trans-world identity is not independent of similarity after all—but neither is it [...] a function of our interests: there is one similarity relation, fixed by sameness of intrinsic monadic properties of individual substances” (p. 162). (It is so that - according to C&O—the strong link subsisting between weak haecceitism and strong essentialism emerges in Leibniz’s metaphysics). As a consequence of this interpretation, C&O offer a new account of the complete concept doctrine in Leibniz, contrasting the received view of it as a “*mere list* (or series of lists) of general properties”. A complete concept “has some content over and above the general properties that can (at least by God) be extracted from it” (p. 171). Therefore C&O attribute to complete individual concepts a dual aspect: they are singular like Scotistic *thisnesses*, but they necessarily contain “a particular set of qualitative properties”. To determine the set of general qualities is the singular component, whereas the set of general qualities is instantiated in only one possible individual. Thus Pii is preserved. At the same time the role of singular propositions is restated.

To explain how this intermediate nature of complete concepts is possible, C&O identify Leibniz’s individual substances with the inner law-of-the series (or primitive active force) that, in some sense, contains all the internal state of the substance itself (pp. 173; 226); and consider the corresponding individual concept as “a determinate singular item of the Leibnizian semantics that contains and explains all the predicate” that are true of the substance (pp. 173 – 74). As C&O emphasize, a substance in Leibniz’s sense “neither contains as an element (component) nor possesses as an aspect or feature, but *is* what Leibniz calls a law-of-the series” (p. 226). Insofar as the substantial form in Leibniz’s sense is “law-enforcing” it is causally active; therefore it is the law-of-the series – i. e. the substance itself. Interpreting the law-of-the series as “an immanent, contingent function having (total temporary) states as arguments and as values”, C&O offer a basis for a coherent account of many aspects of Leibniz’s metaphysics (pp. 228 ff.). In the last part of the book they recapitulate some central issues of Leibniz’s thought (the role of miracles; the doctrine of marks and traces of the past and of the future in our souls; the role of time, etc.) and attempt to glean some

philosophical advantages from the Leibnizian perspective concerning the contemporary debate on identity and difference (assuming, as Leibniz does, that relations do not enter into play when individuation is at stake).

That inter-monadic relations “supervene” on the individual substances with their internal states is a thesis that, as I remarked above, may be defended with textual evidence; but things are not so clear about supervenience of laws of nature: to the best of my knowledge there is not a single passage in which Leibniz writes something that suggests this view (regardless of the fact that one may have serious doubts about the explicative power of “supervenience”). C&O, however, do not attempt a “philological” reconstruction of Leibniz’s philosophy: their aim is mainly philosophical. What they want is to show that the most important and deepest aspects of Leibniz’s metaphysics are “properly captured” by strong essentialism. As they observe: “It is one thing to ask what Leibniz believed, and another to ask what Leibniz’s pronouncements commit him to” (p. 94). And at the very beginning of their book, we read the following programmatic statement: “On these pages, we are doing little more than what Leibniz himself did, with what Leibniz himself, on a historically sensitive reading of him, seems to have left us” (p. 7).

A strategy like this has some costs and some advantages, too. Among the costs, I count their dismissing as “a botch” (p. 53) the role Leibniz attributes to corporeal substances and, consequently, their favoring Leibniz’s phenomenalism over his realism. C&O admit without any reservation that they consider the expression itself “corporeal substance” as “a misleading shorthand for ‘simple substances related thus-and-so’” (p. 54). But Leibniz did not consider haphazardly the issue of corporeal substances—an issue that continuously emerges in his writings of different periods, and which plays a relevant role in his views of natural philosophy. As for the advantages, the most notable one is that of subjecting Leibniz’s thought to a “torsion” which may be very useful and illuminating for people interested in a more exegetical task.

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