

Was Leibniz Confused about Confusion?*

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Abstract

Leibniz's physicalism about colors and other sensible qualities commits him to two theses about our knowledge of those qualities: first, that we can acquire ideas of sensible qualities apart from any direct acquaintance with the qualities themselves; second, that we can acquire distinct (i.e., non-confused) ideas of such qualities through the development of physical-theoretical accounts. According to some commentators, however, Leibniz frequently denies both claims. His views on the subject are muddled and incoherent, they say, both because he is ambivalent about the nature of sensible qualities, and because he gets confused about confusion, losing sight of his own distinction between the confusion proper to perceptions and that proper to ideas. In opposition to this, I argue that the critics have misunderstood Leibniz's views, which are both consistent over time and coherent. The key to understanding his position is to appreciate what he characterizes as a kind of redundancy in our ideas of sensible qualities, a crucial feature of his view overlooked by the critics.

1. Two Inconsistencies

In his *Treatise of Human Nature*, Hume identifies as the fundamental principle of the modern philosophy “the opinion concerning colors, sounds, tastes, smells, heat and cold; which it asserts to be nothing but impressions in the mind, derived from the operation of external objects, and without any resemblance to the qualities of the objects” (I, iv, §4). This opinion, or something very like it, can be found explicitly in the writings of such early modern luminaries as Descartes, Boyle, Locke, and many others.¹ It is therefore testimony to the distinctiveness of Leibniz's thought that he rejects this “fundamental principle” in its entirety. In the first place, he insists that our sensations (and ideas) of sensible qualities *do* resemble the qualities of external objects. Reviewing François Lamy's *De la Connoissance de Soi-même*, he explains:

I do not agree with the opinion accepted by many today, and followed by our author, that there is no resemblance or relation between our sensations and

*This paper won the 2004 Leibniz Society Essay Competition

corporeal traces. It seems rather that our sensations represent and express them perfectly. Perhaps someone will say that the sensation of heat does not resemble motion: yes, without doubt it does not resemble a sensible motion, like that of a carriage wheel; but it does resemble the assemblage of small motions in the fire and in the organs, which are its cause; or rather it is only their representation So all the jibes and ranting against the schools and against the ordinary philosophy, according to which our sensations bear a resemblance to the traces of objects, are useless, and arise only from excessively superficial considerations. (G IV 575-76=WF 141-42)²

More importantly for our purposes, though, Leibniz denies that sensible qualities are mere impressions in the mind; he conceives of them rather as “modes (*manières*) or modifications of bodies and not of our mind, while our sensations are in truth ways of being of the soul, but ones which represent those bodies” (G IV 576=WF 142). More exactly, he maintains a version of the view known as “physicalism” in contemporary debates about the nature of color: he wants to identify colors and other sensible qualities not with any sensations, but with the microphysical properties of external objects the operation of which (putatively) gives rise to our sensations. Thus, in general terms, he holds that “heat, color, etc., are merely subtle motions and figures” (L 102). “What is more probable,” he asks, “than that all sensible qualities are merely tactual qualities varying according to the variety of sense organs? But touch recognizes only magnitude, motion, situation, or figure and various degrees of resistance in bodies” (L 189). On the question of which particular motions and figures sensible qualities are to be identified with, Leibniz typically balks. He does consider various proposals on offer in his day, such as that heat consists in “a vortex of very fine dust,” red “the rotation of certain small globes,” and sound something “produced in air as circles are in water when a stone is tossed in” (G VI 499=AG 186; cf. L 285), but he usually stops short of endorsing such suggestions. Still, his reluctance appears to spring solely from doubts about the details of these accounts, and not about their general form: he clearly thinks these are the right *sorts* of accounts to give of sensible qualities. The one exception to his practice of not endorsing specific proposals occurs in the case of white, which more than once he confidently affirms to be “nothing but an assemblage of a number of small convex mirrors” (G IV 575–76; L 96–97).

This physicalist stance on sensible qualities commits Leibniz to two theses of significance for the present discussion. First, if colors and the like are merely collections of microphysical properties, then one ought to be capable of acquiring

ideas of those qualities apart from any direct acquaintance with them. For instance, a man born blind ought to be able to acquire ideas of color and light, even though he has never seen them, because those qualities would be explicable in terms of primary qualities, that is, qualities of more than one sense, which the blind man can readily acquire. Leibniz appears to endorse just this thought when he says: "I have no doubt that a man born blind could speak aptly about colors and make a speech in praise of light, without being acquainted with it, just from having learned about its effects and about the conditions in which it occurs" (NE 287). In such a case as this, the sightless man evidently has ideas of colors and light, given that he is able to speak of these qualities intelligently, even though he is not "acquainted" with them through sense experience.³ Second, Leibniz's physicalism, together with certain of his other views, commits him to the position that distinct (i.e., non-confused) ideas of sensible qualities are within our reach. To see this point, we must realize that from Leibniz's perspective, an idea is distinct when it allows one to give a "nominal" definition of the thing, that is, an enumeration of marks or properties sufficient for distinguishing the thing in question from other things, or other kinds of things.⁴ But physical-theoretical accounts of sensible qualities, such as the idea that white is an assemblage of small convex mirrors, appear to supply just such definitions. As Margaret Wilson (1977, 328) explains,

...if we are allowed to suppose that a *red* object, for example, is just one that reflects light waves of such and such frequency in such and such circumstances, there is no obvious reason why we could not ascribe to ourselves a distinct notion of red, even on the supposition that our (sense) perceptions are all confused. We would be able to say, for instance, that red objects differ from all others in that they reflect wave-lengths in range $l_x - l_y$.

Nicholas Jolley (1984, 184) echoes this sentiment:

...if we remember [Leibniz's] definition of 'distinct idea', there is no reason in principle why we should not have a distinct idea of red, or, moreover, why such an idea should not be communicated to a blind person. Leibniz seems to deny that our color concepts could become distinct in this way, but he is surely not entitled to say that this is more than a contingent limitation relative to the current state of optics in his day. In time, as the science of optics advances, we will be able to provide a theoretical definition of red in terms of textures, wave-lengths, and the like; Leibniz himself toys with such a possibility when he suggests that red may be the 'revolving of certain small globes'.

From the perspective of these commentators, a scientific account of a quality such as red would provide the materials for a nominal definition of red, and therefore would give us a distinct idea of that quality. Hence, Leibniz's belief in the possibility of such accounts commits him to belief in the possibility of acquiring such distinct ideas. To this evidence we may add the following comment from a 1699 letter to Thomas Burnett: "I do not have a distinct idea of all colors, being required often to say that it is a something-I-know-not-what that I sense very clearly, but cannot explain well.... When Newton publishes his book on colors we will understand them more distinctly" (G III 247=AG 287). In saying this, Leibniz clearly implies that he already has distinct ideas of some colors, and perhaps that he may soon have even more.

In other texts, however, he appears to deny both of these views. In one interesting passage, he maintains that a person cannot acquire an idea of heat apart from direct acquaintance with that quality:

Imagine a land where men do not know the sun and fire and have blood which is cold, not warm; surely they cannot be made to understand what heat is merely by describing it, for even if someone were to explain to them the innermost secrets of nature and even interpret perfectly the cause of heat, they would still not recognize heat from this description if it were presented to them, for they could not know that this peculiar sensation which they perceived in their minds is excited by this particular motion, since we cannot notice distinctly what arises in our mind and what in our organs. But if someone kindles a fire near them, they would at length learn what heat is. (L 285)⁵

To say that these men from a heatless land might understand the "innermost secrets of nature" and nevertheless not know what heat is is tantamount to saying that they could possess a perfect physical-theoretical account of heat without having an idea of heat; at most they would only understand the nature of the *cause* of heat. In the same way, Leibniz adds, "a man born blind could learn the whole of optics yet not acquire any idea of light" (ibid). Now if it were possible, in Leibniz's mind, for us to develop distinct ideas of sensible qualities, then nothing would prevent us from communicating those ideas to people who are unable to have sensory experiences of the qualities themselves, since the content of those ideas could be specified solely in terms of qualities of more than one sense, such as shapes and motions. But with the above remarks, he appears to deny that any such ideas can be communicated under these circumstances. Hence, the allegation goes,

these texts conflict with those in which he indicates that a blind man *could* come to have an idea of light and of colors.

Furthermore, Leibniz sometimes suggests or implies that the confusion in our ideas of sensible qualities cannot be overcome, that is, that we cannot develop distinct ideas of those qualities. He believes that “the confusion that reigns in ideas can be exempt from blame, being an imperfection of our nature; for we cannot discern the causes, for example, of odors and tastes, nor the content of these qualities” (NE 256). But this confusion, being an imperfection of our nature, presumably reflects an essential limitation. In addition, Leibniz often speaks rather pessimistically about our prospects for nominally defining sensible qualities, as when he remarks that “pleasure cannot be given a nominal definition any more than can light or heat” or that “green can no more be given a nominal definition, through which it could be recognized, than can blue or yellow” (NE 194, 297).⁶ But if we cannot nominally define such qualities, then we cannot distinctly conceive them, in which case what ideas we do have of them must be hopelessly confused.

To summarize, then, Leibniz appears to endorse each of the following theses:

- A1.* We can acquire ideas of sensible qualities apart from any direct acquaintance with those qualities.
- A2.* We cannot acquire ideas of sensible qualities apart from direct acquaintance with those qualities.

- B1.* We can acquire distinct (i.e., non-confused) ideas of sensible qualities.
- B2.* Our ideas of sensible qualities are ineluctably confused.

But of course (*A1*) and (*A2*) form an inconsistent pair, as do (*B1*) and (*B2*), given that no idea can be both distinct and confused. Leibniz’s deliberations on sensible qualities and our knowledge of them therefore seem seriously muddled.

2. Wilson’s Diagnosis

I will be arguing below that these apparent tensions in Leibniz’s view are merely apparent, arising as they do from misunderstandings. Before proceeding to that, however, I want to consider a prominent diagnosis, due to Margaret Wilson (1977), of what has gone wrong in Leibniz’s thinking. One might suppose that the inconsistencies can be explained by the simple thought that at some point Leibniz

changed his mind on the issues in question. But as Wilson in effect points out, this will not do, given that Leibniz repeatedly alternates between (A1) and (A2), and between (B1) and (B2), sometimes even within a single context. In its place, she offers a subtle, two-part explanation of Leibniz's duplicitousness.

To understand the first part, we must realize that in many of the passages in which Leibniz looks askance at the possibility of acquiring distinct ideas of sensible qualities, he notes that our *perceptions* of such qualities are ineluctably confused and then appears to infer from this fact that the corresponding *ideas* must likewise be ineluctably confused. That is, he affirms that

B3. Our perceptions of sensible qualities are ineluctably confused.

And from this deduces (B2), i.e., that our ideas of sensible qualities are ineluctably confused. According to Wilson, however, many of Leibniz's remarks suggest that the sort of confusion proper to ideas differs significantly from that proper to perceptions, and more to the point, differs in a way that renders the inference illicit.⁷ What she has in mind is this. When Leibniz claims that a perception is confused, in the contexts in question at least, he means roughly that the perception's "ingredients"—the *petites perceptions* it comprises—cannot be distinguished within it. He illustrates this notion of confusion in the *New Essays* with the example of a rapidly spinning cog-wheel, the perimeter of which is perceived as a transparency. This perception is not simple, he says, but is in fact composed of a series of successive perceptions of the alternating teeth and gaps, which we are unable to discern within it because of the wheel's great angular velocity. It is this indiscernability of constituents, for Leibniz, that makes the perception confused (NE 403-4).⁸ However, says Wilson, he takes a rather different view of the nature of the confusion in our ideas, which for convenience I will call *conceptual confusion*.⁹ He characterizes conceptual confusion not as having to do with implicit complexity, but as consisting in the lack of a certain conceptual ability, specifically, the ability to give a nominal definition. But our ability to give such a definition of a sensible quality, the thought goes, should not be tied to our ability to discern the constitution of that quality in our sensory perceptions of it. In his discussion of the cog-wheel example, Leibniz maintains that it is the nature of our perception of the transparency "to be confused and to remain so; for if the confusion ceased (e.g., if the motion slowed down enough for us to be able to observe the parts in succession) it would no longer be this same perception, i.e., it would no longer be

this image [*phantôme*] of transparency” (NE 403). And he can consistently hold that all perceptual confusion is thus ineliminable. However, the ineluctability of perceptual confusion entails nothing about whether the articulation of nominal definitions of sensible qualities falls within our power, for we could formulate such definitions through the development of physical-theoretical accounts, even if we never fail to sense those qualities as simple (i.e., lacking complexity). (B3), then, does not entail (B2). Yet Leibniz sometimes seems to think otherwise. Why? The answer, according to Wilson at least, is that in the relevant discussions he tends to get confused about confusion, losing sight of his own distinction between perceptual and conceptual confusion, and even his fundamental distinction between perceptions and ideas. As a result, he fails to distinguish (B3) from (B2) and comes to assert the latter because he carelessly mistakes the considerations supporting (B3) as support for (B2).

Leibniz’s first mistake, then, on Wilson’s reading, is that he gets confused about confusion. The second, more fundamental source of tension is an “unrationalized, pervasive” ambivalence Wilson detects in his views on the nature of sensible qualities (1977, 330). In particular, the idea is that Leibniz vacillates between the physicalist view that sensible qualities are nothing more than certain primary qualities, and the view that they are something more than, perhaps something caused by, those primary qualities. On those occasions when he adopts the former perspective, he tends to accept (A1) and (B1). When he favors the latter point of view, however, he tends to assert (A2) and (B2). In this way, Leibniz’s supposed ambivalence about sensible qualities explains his tendency to alternate between mutually exclusive theses about our knowledge of those qualities.

Wilson is not the only prominent Leibniz scholar who has leveled such charges. Following her, Nicholas Jolley claims that “even a limited analysis suggests that Leibniz is ambivalent in his treatment of the possession of colour concepts” (1984, 184). He then proceeds to sketch the main points of her interpretation and concludes that her assessment of the ways in which Leibniz goes wrong and why is “largely convincing” (186). From my perspective, however, something has gone seriously wrong in this analysis. It seems to me that though Leibniz often fails to express himself with sufficient clarity, his theory of confused ideas involves none of the inconsistencies imputed to it by Wilson and Jolley. To the contrary, I will argue, the critics misunderstand his views and consequently see tensions, inconsistencies, and confusions where there are none.

In §4 below, I will argue that Leibniz consistently and coherently holds the following two doctrines: (i) the confusion in our ideas is just as ineluctable as that in our perceptions, despite the fact that we are capable of developing scientific accounts of sensible qualities; (ii) there is a sense in which the blind man can come to have ideas of color and light, and another in which he cannot. The first thesis entails that, despite appearances, (B1) and (B2) are not in fact inconsistent. The second reveals that Leibniz's remarks about what a blind man can and cannot know (i.e., those taken as support for (A1) and (A2)) only *seem* inconsistent because of a failure to recognize an important but usually only implicit distinction operating in the background of the philosopher's thought. Together, these two theses fully vindicate his theory of confused ideas from the objections lodged by Wilson and Jolley. Before I turn to that argument, however, I want to begin to cast doubt on Wilson's diagnosis of Leibniz's troubles.

3. Leibniz's "Confusion"

Wilson accuses Leibniz of getting confused in many of those passages in which he affirms that our ideas of sensible qualities are essentially confused (i.e., (B2)) on the ground that the confusion in our sensory perceptions of those qualities cannot be removed (i.e., (B3)). I believe, to the contrary, that with respect to this issue it is Wilson and not Leibniz who is confused. Leibniz does indeed endorse (B2), but not because he loses sight of any fundamental distinction between perceptual and conceptual confusion; rather he asserts (B2) because from his perspective reflection on the nature of confused ideas supports that thesis just as reflection on the nature of confused perceptions supports (B3). To see that this is so, we must first put to rest a widespread misconception, expressed by Wilson and a host of other commentators, about Leibniz's use of 'confused', namely that the term has one sense when used in talk about perceptions, and quite another when applied to ideas or concepts.¹⁰ As I see it, at least in the contexts relevant to the present discussion, Leibniz has only one kind of confusion in mind, equally applicable both to perceptions and ideas; that is, for him perceptual and conceptual confusion are one and the same thing.

I noted above that in the relevant contexts Leibnizian perceptions are confused in the sense that they have implicit complexity or content. But this is precisely the sense in which ideas are said to be confused too. Leibniz holds that to call an idea clear but confused is to say that though the idea itself is accessible to the mind, its

ingredients are, at least for the most part, not. In general terms, his view is that “confusion is when several things are present, but there is no way of distinguishing one from another” (MP 146). This applies to ideas as much as to perceptions. Thus, he holds that “sensible ideas appear simple because they are confused and thus do not provide the mind with any way of making discriminations within what they contain.” He illustrates this point by noting that the idea of green, though composed of the ideas of blue and yellow, is regarded as simple because we are unaware of any divisions within it (NE 120). That is, what makes an idea confused, according to this passage, is that we are unable to discern its ingredients within it. Similarly, Leibniz remarks that “We now have a complete analysis of green into blue and yellow, and almost all our remaining questions about it concern these ingredients; yet we are quite unable to discern the ideas of blue and yellow within our sensory idea of green, simply because it is a confused idea” (NE 403). Again, he holds that our notions of colors are confused because the colors’ “composition is not manifest in the sensation we have of them” (G IV 550=WF 105), and that we have a clear but confused knowledge of substance because “people know very well how to recognize it and distinguish it from an accident, even though they do not distinguish what it contains in its notion” (G III 247=AG 287). The natural way to understand these passages, I submit, is as expressing the thought that conceptual confusion consists in the fact that there are ingredients present which cannot be distinguished by the subject.¹¹

Two of the passages just quoted come from the *New Essays*. However some defenders of the misconception I am trying to correct have asserted (without argument) that in that work Leibniz tends to follow Locke in using ‘perception’ and ‘idea’ interchangeably.¹² If this were true, it would undercut the use of these texts as evidence for my position, since Leibniz’s claims to the effect that “ideas” are confused in the sense that we cannot discern any divisions or complexity within them might actually be characterizations of perceptual rather than conceptual confusion. This objection collapses under the weight of three observations, however. First, in the *New Essays* Leibniz seems generally unwilling to accommodate himself to Locke’s terminology when it makes a difference, as it would in this case. In fact, he is often at pains to criticize Locke’s usage when it differs from his, as he does, for example, at NE 255. Second, Leibniz goes out of his way in this work to distinguish perceptions (or thoughts) from ideas (NE 119, 300), something he would not do if he were using the terms interchangeably. Third, there are some places in the *New Essays* where it would be implausible to

suppose that Leibniz is merely adapting himself to Locke's idiolect. Of particular importance is Bk. II, Ch. xxix, in which Leibniz, alluding to his *Meditations on Knowledge, Truth, and Ideas*, summarizes his distinctions between obscure, clear, confused, and distinct ideas. Surely in this context he is not thinking of perceptions when he writes of ideas. Yet he remarks there that our ideas of sensible qualities "are clear, because we recognize them and easily tell them from one another; but they are not distinct, because we cannot distinguish their contents" (NE 255-56). Once again Leibniz (at least implicitly) characterizes confusion as a matter of being unable to discern the constituents in an idea, and surely here we can take his use of 'idea' at face value. These are powerful considerations; they make it difficult to accept the suggestion that Leibniz's remarks about ideas in the *New Essays* should not be taken at face value.

Commentators have almost universally understood those passages in which Leibniz links the terms 'obscure', 'clear', 'confused', and 'distinct' with various grades of conceptual capacity as giving *definitions* of those terms. This practice receives support from his remark that 'confusion' can be "taken in my sense to stand for the lack of an analysis of a notion which one has" (NE 258), since the lack of an analysis is equivalent to the inability to give a nominal definition. Also, Leibniz's language sometimes suggests that he intends to be giving the *meanings* of these terms; he says for example that our ideas of sensible qualities are clear "*because* we recognize them and easily tell them from one another" (NE 255, emphasis added; cf. G VI 500=AG 187). If we say these are definitions, however, we will apparently be hard pressed to reconcile these passages with those I have been discussing in which Leibniz construes conceptual confusion as implicit complexity. We will be inclined to understand conceptual confusion either as the property of underwriting a certain level of conceptual ability, or else as the property of being such a level of ability, and in either case we will seem forced to say that that is not the sort of confusion Leibniz has in mind when he speaks of confused concepts as having implicit content.

The key to resolving this tension is to realize that Leibniz's definitions of clarity, obscurity, distinctness, and confusion in terms of levels of conceptual ability are not *real* but merely *nominal* definitions. The difference, in essence, is that real definitions express the nature of a thing—they tell us what it really is—whereas nominal definitions merely provide us with distinguishing marks. Gold can be defined nominally as the heaviest metal, for example, but that definition does not capture the essence of gold. If Leibniz were giving a real definition of conceptual

confusion when he links it with the ability to recognize but not define the thing in question, then he would be affirming that this sort of confusion consists in (or in the underwriting of) such a level of ability. (This is how previous commentators appear to have understood these definitions.) But as we have seen, he also views conceptual confusion as consisting in implicit content. On this way of viewing the matter, then, Leibniz would be guilty of duplicitousness. I suggest, however, that we understand Leibniz to be giving only nominal definitions in these contexts. That is, I suggest that when Leibniz links the clarity, obscurity, confusion, and distinctness of concepts with levels of conceptual ability, he is not purporting to specify the nature of these properties, but only their distinguishing marks. He is setting forth the means for recognizing when our concepts have these properties, not telling us what it means for them to be clear or distinct. It is true that he does not always clearly distinguish these properties from their respective marks, and for this reason it is quite understandable that his readers have tended to confuse the properties themselves with the conceptual capacities that signal their presence. But there are good reasons to think that these capacities are only marks of these properties and do not enter into descriptions of the nature of the properties themselves. From this perspective, distinctness is the property of having explicit content, and the distinguishing characteristic of a concept with this property is that it allows us to give a (nominal) definition of its object. Similarly, confusedness consists in having implicit content, and the mark of an idea with this quality is that though it may allow us to recognize and distinguish its object, it does not allow us to define it.

It may seem odd that Leibniz would make so much of the identifying features of conceptual clarity and distinctness. This appearance of oddity disappears, however, as soon as we appreciate the significance of his well-known criticism of Descartes's principle that whatever is clearly and distinctly perceived is true. It is important to realize that he does not object to the principle itself, or to the Cartesian conception of clarity and distinctness it presupposes. Indeed, he confides to Thomas Burnett: "It seems to me that my use of the terms clear and distinct does not depart from Descartes's, who is most responsible for making them fashionable" (G III 247=AG 287; cf. NE 255). He protests rather that the principle "is useless unless we use criteria for the clear and distinct, criteria which we have made explicit, and unless we have established the truth of the ideas" (G IV 425=AG 26-27; cf. G II 62-63; G IV 577=WF 142; NE 219; ML 150). Of first importance here is Leibniz's insistence that we need explicit criteria for clarity and distinctness.

Without these criteria, he claims, careless people are liable to mistake obscure and confused ideas for clear and distinct ones. If we can give explicit criteria for these notions, however, then people will be less likely to make such mistakes. In effect, Leibniz is suggesting that in order for Descartes's principle to be useful, we must be able to state marks sufficient for distinguishing the clear from the obscure, and the distinct from the confused; in Leibnizian terms, we must have a distinct understanding (i.e., nominal definitions) of clarity and distinctness. Thus when he introduces his classic discussion of the grades of ideas in the *Meditations* with the comment that he aims to explain what "can be established about the distinctions and criteria that relate to ideas and knowledge" (G IV 422=AG 23), we should understand him to be announcing that he is going to propose distinguishing marks of clarity and distinctness, that is, the sort of explicit criteria he faulted Descartes for failing to provide.¹³ This claim receives confirmation later in the essay when he remarks, in connection with the Cartesian principle that whatever is perceived clearly and distinctly is true, that "This axiom is useless unless *the criteria of clearness and distinctness which we have proposed* are applied and unless the truth of the ideas is established" (L 294; emphasis added), for the criteria he has in mind here could only be the levels of conceptual ability discussed earlier in the essay. On this reading, then, Leibniz is thinking along the following lines. Suppose we have an idea that seems to us to be clear and distinct. How can we be sure that this idea really is clear and distinct, in the basic sense of these terms given by Descartes? The answer: by checking to see whether we have the appropriate level of conceptual capacity. Can we recognize the object of that idea and distinguish it from other things? If so, the idea is clear, and if not, obscure. If the idea is clear, then are we able to enumerate marks sufficient for distinguishing the object of that idea from other things? If so, the idea is clear and distinct; otherwise it is clear but confused. In this way the levels of conceptual ability Leibniz associates with the various kinds of ideas take the guesswork out of the classification of our various beliefs within the basic Cartesian framework.

Leibniz's claim that his use of 'clear' and 'distinct' does not depart from Descartes's is significant. From the perspective of the standard interpretation, this must appear to be a mistake, or at best a gross exaggeration, since Descartes never defines clarity and distinctness in terms of conceptual capacities. To the contrary, in the *Principles* he characterizes distinctness as the property a clear perception has when it is "so sharply separated from all other perceptions that it contains within itself only what is clear." A clear perception, in turn, he defines as

one that is “present and accessible to the attentive mind” (CSM I 207–8). Thus among those perceptions present and accessible to the attentive mind, the distinct ones are those which contain only perceptions that are themselves present and accessible to the attentive mind. Now, we know Leibniz was familiar with this characterization of distinctness because we have his highly detailed notes on this part of the *Principles*, which by 1692 he had prepared for publication (see L 383ff., esp. 389). But given his familiarity with Descartes’s position, it would be strange for him to write just seven years later that his usage did not differ from his predecessor’s, if in fact for him distinctness had to do with the ability to give a nominal definition. By contrast, if Leibniz’s notion of distinctness has to do with being able to discern the ingredients in an idea or concept, we can readily see why Leibniz thought he was preserving Descartes’s usage. For to say that an idea’s ingredients can be discerned is just to say that those ingredients are present and accessible to the attentive mind; we discern them by attending to them, and we *can* discern them if and only if they are accessible to the attending mind.¹⁴ On my interpretation, therefore, we can make sense of Leibniz’s claim that he is following Descartes’s usage, whereas on the standard reading we cannot.

From Leibniz’s perspective, then, a distinct idea is one in which we can discern the idea’s ingredients, and the criterion or distinguishing mark of such an idea is the ability to give a nominal definition of its object. But why, we may ask, does he regard this level of conceptual ability as indicative of the presence of a distinct idea, that is, an idea in which the constituent ideas can be noticed? Conversely, why does he consider the inability to give a nominal definition a mark of the presence of an idea the ingredients of which cannot be detected? To answer these questions we must appreciate an important point that commentators have tended to miss: being able to state the distinguishing marks of a thing, on Leibniz’s view, presupposes being able to discern the ingredients in the idea of that thing, because the ingredients themselves give us the marks of the thing in question. If an idea is distinct, then we will be able to discern its contents and therefore will be able to give a nominal definition of its object. By contrast, if an idea is confused, we will not be able to discern its components and consequently will not be able to state distinguishing marks for its object. That this is Leibniz’s view can be seen clearly from this remark about ideas of sensible qualities:

They are clear, because we recognize them and easily tell them from one another; but they are not distinct, because we cannot distinguish their contents. Thus, we cannot define these ideas: all we can do is to make them known

through examples; and, beyond that, until their inner structure has been deciphered we have to say that they are a *je ne sais quoi*. Thus, ...we do not call 'distinct' all the ideas which are distinguishing (i.e., which distinguish objects), but only those which are distinguished, i.e., which are in themselves distinct and which distinguish in the object the marks which make it known, thus yielding an analysis or definition. Ideas which are not like this we call 'confused'. (NE 255)

Three things should be noticed about this passage. First, the opening sentence shows that an idea's distinctness consists in its being such that its contents can be distinguished. Second, Leibniz says that we cannot define sensible qualities precisely because our ideas of them are not distinct in this sense. That is, we cannot define these qualities just because we cannot discern the ingredients in our ideas of them. The rationale for saying this is evidently that the ingredient ideas themselves give the marks that would constitute a definition of the thing. Finally, after pointing out that distinctness involves being able to make out the contents of an idea, Leibniz says that distinct ideas "distinguish in the object the marks which make it known." They do this because in such ideas we can distinguish the constituent ideas, which give the distinguishing marks of the thing in question. For example, my idea of a "metal which resists cupellation and is insoluble in aquafortis" is, according to Leibniz, a distinct idea of gold. It is distinct, he says, because "it gives the criteria of the definition of 'gold'" (NE 266-67). We discern the ingredients in this idea, and in doing so we discover that resistance to cupellation and insolubility in aquafortis are marks of gold. Anyone who possesses this idea will therefore be capable of giving a nominal definition of gold. Contrast this case with that of a confused idea, such as my (sensory) idea of the color red. Unlike the assayer's idea of gold, this idea does not make explicit any reciprocal marks of red; it is not (and will never be) an idea of a something-with-such-and-such-properties, but of a "something-I-know-not-what that I sense very clearly, but cannot explain well" (G III 247=AG 287). In other words, whereas a distinct idea can always be known under a description of the form "an idea of something with property X (and property Y, ...)," where these properties are distinguishing marks, a confused idea cannot be known under such a description, because we cannot distinguish the contents of that idea and therefore cannot discover any properties possessed by its object. It is beyond our power to discern those ingredients in the confused idea, just as it is beyond our power to discern the minute, insensible perceptions in our sensible perceptions of that quality (cf. NE

256). Consequently, it is likewise beyond our power to give nominal definitions of these qualities, because on Leibniz's view doing so would require being able to distinguish the contents in our ideas of those qualities.

This suggests an objection. If the ingredients in an idea are just the ideas of its distinguishing marks, then are yellow and blue not marks of green, given that the ideas of yellow and blue are ingredients in our idea of green? If so, then we should be able to give a nominal definition of green as, say, a thorough mixture of yellow and blue. Yet Leibniz is adamant that we still cannot give a nominal definition of green, even after we learn that our ideas of yellow and blue are ingredients in our idea of green. On the one hand, he says that "It is obvious that green ... comes from a mixture of blue and yellow; which makes it credible that the idea of green is composed of the ideas of those two colors" (NE 120). But on the other, he declares that "green can no more be given a nominal definition, through which it could be recognized, than can blue or yellow" (NE 297).¹⁵ Hence, giving a nominal definition must require more than just knowledge of the ingredients of an idea. The solution to this difficulty lies with the fact that the ingredients of an idea only provide us with distinguishing criteria when those ingredients can be discerned *in that idea*. If the ingredients are not explicit in the idea, they will not be giving us any criteria by which we could recognize the idea's object. Knowing that the ideas of yellow and blue are ingredients in our idea of green, for example, does not give us any distinguishing marks of green, for the simple reason that we can never notice any yellow or blue in our confused perceptions of green. This is why Leibniz explicitly acknowledges that the definition of green as a thorough mixture of yellow and blue does not rank as a nominal definition (*ibid.*). Similarly, alternating teeth and gaps do not constitute a distinguishing mark of continuously transparent rings, because we cannot discern the teeth and gaps in our confused perceptions of the spinning cog-wheel. However, if we could, *per impossibile*, detect the yellow and blue in our sensations of green, or the teeth and gaps in our sense-perceptions of the transparent ring, then these ingredients would give us the relevant distinguishing marks, and we would be able to give nominal definitions of these things. I will have more to say on this head below, when this objection reappears in a different guise.

I have been arguing for two claims: that on Leibniz's view, conceptual distinctness, like perceptual distinctness, is the property of having explicit content or ingredients, and that he considers the ability to enumerate the distinguishing marks of a thing (i.e., to define it nominally) to be itself the distinguishing mark

of a distinct concept. This position has two major advantages over the traditional reading favored by Wilson and others. First, it allows us to harmonize those passages in which Leibniz associates conceptual distinctness with explicit content with those in which he associates it with the capacity to give a nominal definition. The former texts reveal the nature of conceptual distinctness itself, whereas the latter ones provide us with the sort of explicit criterion of distinctness that Leibniz repeatedly faulted Descartes for failing to give. The standard view, in contrast, does not sort well with the former passages, in which Leibniz assimilates conceptual distinctness to the distinctness proper to perceptions. Second, the view I am proposing has the advantage of theoretical simplicity: it allows us to explain the majority of his remarks about distinct perceptions *and* distinct ideas in terms of a single notion of distinctness, whereas the standard view requires two apparently unrelated kinds of distinctness in order to account for those same statements.¹⁶

We are now finally in a position to see why Leibniz thinks that sensory ideas are ineluctably confused. It is not, as Wilson has it, because he sometimes conflates the kind of confusion proper to ideas with that proper to perceptions, but because the same basic sorts of considerations that lead him to conclude that sensory perceptions are essentially confused also suggest that sensory ideas are essentially confused. In the case of sense-perceptions, Leibniz uses the cog-wheel example to show that we could not put ourselves in a position to notice the alternating teeth and gaps of the wheel while continuing to perceive the continuous transparency. To sense the former would require slowing the wheel down to the point that we no longer sense the latter. Similarly, if we have a sensible perception of green, we cannot at the same time sensibly perceive the yellow and blue out of which the green is composed. We may put the green thing under a microscope and see the yellow and blue, but then there would no longer be a perception of green. Examples such as these are taken to illustrate that perceptions, if confused, are essentially confused. But reflection on the same kinds of examples suggests that confusion in ideas is likewise essential. For example, when we see the spinning cog-wheel, we come to have a confused idea of a continuous transparency. But we are quite unable to discern within this idea the ideas of the teeth and the gaps on the wheel, even after we come to learn, by slowing the wheel down, that these ideas must be its ingredients. Though we know that the idea of the transparency must be complex, it continues to appear as simple as ever, and any idea in which this complexity could be discerned, Leibniz thinks, would not be that idea of the transparency that we acquire through the senses. Likewise with our ideas of sensible

qualities. For example, the microscope informs us that green is a thorough mixture of yellow and blue, which according to Leibniz “makes it credible that the idea of green is composed of the ideas of those two colors.” Yet this does not change the fact that our idea of green does not “provide the mind with any way of making discriminations” within what it contains (NE 120). We are still “quite unable to discern the ideas of blue and yellow within our sensory idea of green” (NE 403). Similarly, we are unable to discern within our idea of green the ideas of yellow and blue, even after we learn through the use of a microscope that the latter are ingredients in the former. An indication of this is that the idea of green seems just as simple as it ever did (because it is confused), even though we know that in reality it must be complex. Leibniz therefore arrives at the conclusion that our confused ideas are essentially confused by reflection on the same kinds of cases that lead him to the analogous conclusion about perceptions. Of course, this might seem rather unlikely to the commentator who holds that the confusion proper to ideas differs significantly from that proper to perceptions. But I have argued that this is not the case: there is only one kind of confusion in view here, and it has to do with not being able to discern the ingredients in the confused thing.

Wilson’s thesis about the two sorts of confusion leads her to accuse Leibniz of getting confused in a number of passages where “he uses cognition of qualities proper to one sense as paradigms of ‘both’ types of confusion” (1977, 331). But the interpretation I have been urging exonerates Leibniz of this charge. In the first place, he can hardly be guilty of conflating his own two notions of confusion when he has only one. Additionally, my interpretation allows us to understand why Leibniz sometimes seems to have both the thesis that perceptions of sensible qualities are ineluctably confused and the thesis that ideas (concepts, notions, etc.) of sensible qualities are ineluctably confused in view in a single context; for once we realize that ideas and perceptions of sensible qualities are confused in essentially the same way, both theses draw support from reflection on the same kinds of examples. Thus Leibniz seems to take the cog-wheel example to show that both sensory perceptions and sensory ideas are essentially confused (NE 403). Again, this would seem rather odd if the confusion proper to perceptions were of a very different sort from that proper to ideas. Hence the thought that Leibniz must be running together these two senses of confusion. On my interpretation, however, there is nothing unusual here at all.¹⁷

4. The Redundancy of Ideas

I have been arguing that when Leibniz infers (B2) from (B3), he does so for good reason. However, while on one level this vindicates Leibniz, on another it reinforces the central problem of this paper. For he also appears to affirm (B1), which is incompatible with (B2). Further, and not uncoincidentally, the critics say, he incoherently endorses both (A1) and (A2). What, then, are we to say about these apparent contradictions in his view? In this section, I will argue that these supposed tensions are merely apparent, and that they arise from failures to grasp an important subtlety of Leibniz's position.

At the root of the critics's misunderstandings is the assumption that on Leibniz's view we have only one idea for each sensible quality. This in turn leads them to reason that if an idea of a sensible quality is originally confused and this confusion is ineluctable, one cannot come to have a distinct idea of that quality. The assumption is not one Leibniz accepts, however. His position is rather that for any given sensible quality, there are at least two ideas or concepts, one confused, the other(s) distinct.¹⁸ The confused (or sensory) idea, which Leibniz sometimes characterizes as an image or phantasm,¹⁹ comes to us, if at all, directly through the senses. The distinct (or intellectual) ideas, by contrast, come through reason and experimentation, and arise from our knowledge of the physical circumstances that underlie and accompany the corresponding confused idea. As Leibniz explains in a passage critical to understanding his view, our ideas of sensible qualities

are accompanied by circumstances that have a connection to them, although this connection is not one we understand, and these circumstances furnish something explicable and susceptible to analysis, which also gives some hope that one day we may find the reasons for these phenomena. Thus it happens that there is a kind of redundancy [*pleonasm*] in the perceptions we have of sensible qualities as well as of sensible masses; and this redundancy [*pleonasm*] is that we have more than one notion of the same subject. (NE 299)

The first thing to note about this passage is that the "accompanying circumstances" to which Leibniz alludes are evidently nothing other than the minute shapes and motions to which he elsewhere proposes to reduce sensible qualities. This suspicion is confirmed by other texts in which he is more explicit about the nature of these attending circumstances. In an unpublished essay on physics, for example, he remarks that

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The secret of analysis in physics consists in this one device: the reduction of the confused qualities of the senses (namely: heat and cold in the case of touch, flavors in the case of taste, odors in the case of smell, sounds in the case of hearing, and colors in the case of sight) to the distinct qualities that accompany them, namely number, size, shape, motion, and cohesion, of which the last two are proper to physics. (A VI, iv, N.354)

In this text (and others like it²⁰) sensible qualities are said to be accompanied by certain distinct qualities, which Leibniz identifies as the well-known primary qualities. It stands to reason, then, that when he talks about the circumstances that accompany our *ideas* of sensible qualities, he has in mind these same primary qualities. In other passages he speaks of our confused concepts of sensible qualities as being accompanied also by distinct *concepts* of primary qualities.²¹ Thus: “we can say much to a blind man about extension, intensity, shape and other varieties which accompany colors; but besides these accompanying distinct concepts there is something confused in color which a blind man cannot conceive by the assistance of any words of ours” (LP 51). As this passage makes clear, Leibniz believes there is both a confused concept (*idea*) of color, which comes only through the senses and therefore cannot be possessed by the man born blind, and multiple distinct concepts (*ideas*) which the blind man can acquire apart from any direct experience of the sensible quality itself.

We are now in a position to understand what Leibniz means when he says that there is a redundancy in our perceptions of sensible qualities which consists in the fact that “we have more than one notion of the same subject.” For he holds that with each such quality we can have both a confused sensory idea and one or more distinct ideas, intellectual rather than sensory.²² We may find it helpful to think of the former idea as, properly speaking, an idea of the sensible quality itself, and the latter as ideas not of the quality itself but its accompanying circumstances. However, we must also bear in mind that on Leibniz’s view sensible qualities are in the final analysis nothing more than their attending circumstances. We have seen, for example, that white is attended by an assemblage of small convex mirrors, but that on Leibniz’s view white is nothing more than such an assemblage. So given that a sensible quality is really just its “underlying” conditions, both our confused, sensory idea of the quality and our distinct, intellectual ideas of those conditions will be ideas *of the same subject*, differing not with respect to *what* they represent but *how* they represent it, the one confusedly, the other distinctly. That is why Leibniz can say that “when we perceive colors or smells, we certainly

have no perception other than that of shapes and of motions” (G IV 426=AG 27; cf. NE 131-32; 403-04), for the former qualities are really just qualities of the latter sort.

To be sure, Leibniz’s language sometimes suggests that he wants to *distinguish* sensible qualities from the complexes of primary qualities to which they are reduced in physics. That seems to be the point, for instance, of referring to those complexes as the accompanying circumstances of the sensible qualities, the circumstances being something distinct from the qualities they accompany. Further, he calls colors, heat, and the like “confused qualities” or “confused attributes” in order to distinguish them from the “distinct qualities” or “distinct attributes” that accompany them (A VI, iv, N.354; L 287-88), and in one context he speaks of “the appearance that we call yellowness” which “arises out of that in which we have shown yellowness to consist objectively” (A VI, iv, N.354). Such language certainly seems to suggest that Leibniz means to distinguish sharply between sensible qualities and their conditions. In view of this fact, we may be tempted to follow Wilson in holding that Leibniz equivocates in his use of terms such as ‘heat’, ‘color’, and ‘sound’, using them to denote sometimes certain microphysical properties of bodies, other times something in the mind, specifically an appearance or phenomenon. If this were so, then I would say that in the latter cases Leibniz is being careless or at least speaking loosely, given that in his most explicit characterizations of the nature of sensible qualities, he identifies them with primary qualities. However, another way lies open, one inspired by the “one-world” or “double-aspect” interpretation of Kant.²³ When Leibniz speaks of a sensible quality in contradistinction to its attending circumstances, we might suppose that he is actually speaking of those circumstances, but *only insofar as they are confusedly perceived*. In that case, there would be a distinction between the conditions and the quality, though not a distinction in the order of *things*. There would be only one thing in view—the circumstance(s)—but understood in two ways, either as it is in itself, or as it appears to us. A distinct idea of white, for instance, would represent the assemblage of small convex mirrors as it actually is, whereas a confused idea of that quality would represent the same assemblage, but only as it appears. Both ideas would be ideas of the same thing, yet we could still recognize at least a verbal distinction between the quality and its foundation. This line provides an alternative and fairly plausible explanation of Leibniz’s tendency to speak of sensible qualities as if they were something more than their attending circumstances, while nevertheless identifying them, and it is the view I will adopt

in what follows. But whatever one may think of this proposal, the key point is that Leibniz's considered view appears to be that sensible qualities are merely (complexes of) primary qualities, so that a confused idea of a sensible quality and a distinct idea of its accompanying circumstances can be described accurately as ideas of the same subject.

Now that we have Leibniz's redundancy thesis at least somewhat clearly in view, we can see how he would respond to the charge that his belief in the ineluctability of the confusion in our ideas (i.e., (B2)) leads to inconsistency. For on his view the essential confusedness of our (sensory) ideas of sensible qualities does not negate the possibility of also coming to have distinct ideas of those same qualities. It is true both that my (sensory) ideas of sensible qualities are ineluctably confused, and that I can come to have distinct ideas of those qualities by learning something about the conditions under which they occur. Thus when Leibniz says that Newton's work will give us a more distinct understanding of colors (G III 247=AG 287), he should be understood to be talking about our understanding of the accompanying circumstances of the colors, that is, of the colors as they are in themselves. Similarly, when he suggests that a man born blind can have an idea of color, he has in mind a distinct intellectual idea of the accompanying circumstances of that quality, as we can see from the fact that the blind man comes to have this idea by learning about color's "effects and about the conditions in which it occurs" (NE 287). But when he says that this same man could learn the whole of optics and still have no idea of light (L 285), he has in mind the confused sensory idea. This idea can only be acquired by directly experiencing light, something the blind man cannot do. Leibniz is thinking along similar lines when he remarks that the blind man "could even understand the doctrine of optics, insofar as it depends on distinct and mathematical ideas, although he would not be able to attain to a conception of the *clear-confused*, that is to say, of the image of light and of colors" (NE 137). Thus we do find a kind of unclarity in Leibniz's language inasmuch as he is often inexplicit about whether he has in mind the confused sensory idea or the distinct intellectual idea of the sensible quality; but as long as we are sensitive to this unclarity, we can easily make good sense of all his pronouncements on this subject.

It might be thought that Leibniz's view here is incoherent. For if I had a distinct idea of a sensible quality because I knew something about its accompanying circumstances, could I not then state marks sufficient for recognizing and distinguishing not only those circumstances, but that confused quality itself?

Specifically, would not those circumstances themselves constitute a distinguishing mark of the quality they regularly accompany (the circumstances as they appear)? If so, then I would have a distinct idea not only of the quality's physical basis, but of the quality itself. The latter idea would not, therefore, be ineluctably confused, and it would be wrong of Leibniz to insist that the confusion in our ideas of sensible qualities cannot be overcome or that people who have not experienced these qualities first-hand cannot (in some sense) have an idea of them. Both Wilson (1977, 328) and Jolley (1984, 184) object to Leibniz's view along these lines.

The error in this objection is the thought that my distinct idea of a quality must provide me with distinguishing marks of the quality as it appears to me. To the contrary, on Leibniz's view the only identifying criteria this idea provides are marks of the underlying conditions, the quality as it is in itself. For in order for these criteria to be marks of the quality as it appears, it would have to be possible to discern the ideas of these criteria in my sensory idea of the quality, and this cannot be done because that idea is essentially confused. As Leibniz explains,

if we had arrived at the inner constitutions of certain bodies, these [sensible] qualities would be traced back to their intelligible causes and we should see under what circumstances they were bound to be present; even though it would never be in our power to recognize their causes sensorily, in our sensory ideas which are the confused effects of bodies acting on us. For instance, we now have a complete analysis of green into blue and yellow, and almost all our remaining questions about it concern these ingredients; yet we are quite unable to discern the ideas of blue and yellow within our sensory idea of green, simply because it is a confused idea. (NE 403)

On Leibniz's view, it is because we cannot distinguish the ideas of blue and yellow in our sensory idea of green that these colors do not constitute marks of green and that we cannot define green nominally even though we can give a real or causal definition of that quality as that which results from a thorough mixture of yellow and blue (NE 297). This example illustrates the important point that knowledge of the causes and underlying circumstances of a sensible quality does not suffice for possession of marks sufficient for recognizing that quality and distinguishing it from others. For in order for these causes and circumstances to count as marks of the quality, we would have to be able sensorily to detect those requisites in our perceptions of that quality, which we cannot do because these perceptions are necessarily confused. The point can be put this way. Suppose that a man blind from birth learns that redness occurs when an object under normal lighting has,

say, a certain surface spectral reflectance. He thereby comes to have a distinct idea of red, specifically, of red as it is in itself. Does this idea now put him in a position to recognize redness, understood as a confused quality, when he encounters it, and to distinguish it from other qualities? According to Leibniz, it does not; the blind man's distinct idea allows him to recognize and distinguish the underlying condition of redness, and from this he could infer that redness (the thing as it appears) is present when he detects that these conditions have obtained. But he does not really recognize this redness, or distinguish it from other qualities, in the way that someone acquainted with that color can do. Indeed, though he could perhaps infer the presence of some thing called redness, he would have no idea what it is the presence of which he is inferring. Similarly, the mere fact that we can reduce (in Leibniz's sense of the term) confused sensible qualities to primary qualities, of which we have distinct ideas, does not entail that we can have distinct ideas of those confused qualities. For we reduce these sensible qualities by discovering the distinct qualities that "attend" them, and for the reasons just given, our knowledge of these attendant qualities does not allow us to give nominal definitions of the confused qualities they attend. Even if I know, for example, that red is always (or normally) accompanied by a certain surface spectral reflectance, I am no closer to being able to state any distinguishing marks of that (confused) quality. Suitable marks would need to be properties that I could see in red and that would therefore allow me to recognize red and distinguish it from other qualities. But the surface spectral reflectance that constitutes the nature of red is decidedly not this kind of mark.

A similar observation allows us to remove a related difficulty also raised by Wilson (1977, 330) and Jolley (1984, 184-85). Leibniz holds that the man born blind can in some sense have a distinct, and therefore clear, idea of color. (For Leibniz, as for Descartes, only a clear idea can be distinct.) But anyone who has a clear idea of color must be able to recognize colors and distinguish them from other qualities. Yet the blind man can have no such ability, short of being granted sight. On Leibnizian principles, then, he must lack a clear, and therefore distinct, idea of color. Accordingly, Leibniz cannot consistently hold that the blind man has a distinct idea of color. This problem can be solved by appealing once again to the redundancy of ideas. Speaking more exactly, the blind man can have a distinct idea only of the underlying conditions of colors, of the colors as they are in themselves, and not as they appear to us. The recognitional ability with which this distinct (and therefore clear) idea endows him is strictly speaking an ability

to recognize those conditions and to distinguish them from other things. And this is a recognitional ability the blind man can indeed have, given that these conditions or causes are nothing other than certain primary qualities, that is, qualities of more than one sense. But the fact that the blind man has a clear idea of color as it is does not entail that he can recognize that color as it appears and distinguish it from other qualities. Again, he could perhaps infer the presence or absence of the latter based on the presence or absence of the former, but that would not amount to the kind of direct recognition Leibniz has in mind when he characterizes the nature of clear ideas, for the blind man would not know what appearance or quality-as-it-appears the presence or absence of which he is inferring.

5. Conclusion

I have argued for three key points in the foregoing paragraphs. First, it cannot be that Leibniz gets confused about confusion, losing sight of his own distinction between perceptual and conceptual confusion, for he has no such distinction: he has only one notion of confusion, equally applicable to both perceptions and ideas. Second, he consistently and coherently maintains both that our (sensory) ideas of sensible qualities are just as ineluctably confused as our sensory perceptions of those qualities, *and* that we can acquire distinct ideas of these qualities through the development of physical-theoretical accounts. These theses cohere because we do not arrive at the distinct ideas by somehow disentangling the confusion in our sensory ideas, thereby rendering them distinct. Rather, we come to have the distinct idea *in addition to* the confused one, which by its nature must remain confused. Third, the apparent inconsistency in Leibniz's discussions of the man born blind disappears when we realize that such a person can have ideas of color and light in the sense of distinct, intellectual ideas, but cannot have confused, sensory ideas of those qualities. Thus, given Leibniz's belief in the redundancy of ideas, his apparently incompatible claims about confused ideas should be understood as ambiguous attempts to express the following theses:

- A1'. We can acquire (distinct/intellectual) ideas of sensible qualities apart from any direct acquaintance with those qualities.
- A2'. We cannot acquire (confused/sensory) ideas of sensible qualities apart from direct acquaintance with those qualities.

B1'. We can acquire (distinct/intellectual) ideas of sensible qualities.

B2'. Our (confused/sensory) ideas of sensible qualities are ineluctably confused.

But of course there are no inconsistencies here. I therefore conclude that Leibniz's views about confused ideas, though often expressed unclearly, are not incoherent in any of the ways suggested by the critics.²⁴

Received 13 September 2005

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Abbreviations

- CSM *The Philosophical Writings of Descartes*. 3 vols. J. Cottingham, R. Stoothoff, and D. Murdoch, eds. New York: Cambridge University Press, 1985.
- LP *Leibniz: Logical Papers*. G.H.R. Parkinson, ed. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1966.
- ML *Malebranche et Leibniz: Relations Personnelles*. A. Robinet, ed. Paris: Vrin, 1955.
- MP *Leibniz: Philosophical Writings*. M. Morris and G.H.R. Parkinson, eds. London: J. M. Dent & Sons, 1973.

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Notes

¹See, e.g., Descartes, CSM I 219, 304; III 369; Boyle, *The Origins of Forms and Qualities According to the Corpuscular Philosophy*, in Stewart (1991), 51-52; Locke, *Essay Concerning Human Understanding*, II, viii, §§15, 17.

²Cf. NE 131-33, 264, 296, 403; T §340.

³Descartes had written: "whenever I express something in words, and understand what I am saying, this very fact makes it certain that there is within me an idea of what is signified by the words in question" (CSM II 160). Leibniz strenuously denies this claim on the ground that the notion in question may involve a contradiction and "we certainly have no idea of impossible things." Thus we can perfectly well speak of the fastest motion and understand what we are saying, but we cannot have an idea of the fastest motion because this notion demonstrably involves a contradiction (G IV 424=AG 25-26; cf. DM §§23, 25). Before we can say with confidence that we have an idea of something, then, that thing must be proved possible. In the present case, however, we know that colors and light are

possible because they are actual. Hence it would appear that Leibniz would concede that the blind man who speaks intelligently of colors and light has some idea of these qualities.

⁴L 230-31; G IV 422-23=AG 23-25; G VI 499-500=AG 186-87; DM §24; NE 255-56.

⁵Here we have a forerunner of Frank Jackson's much discussed thought-experiment involving the neuroscientist Mary. See Jackson (1982).

⁶See also LP 51-52; G VI 500=AG 187; G V 18; A VI, iv, N.354; L 230; MP 4.

⁷See Wilson (1977); cf. Wilson (1992, 339-40).

⁸Note that though Wilson and others impute this "implicit complexity" sense of confusion to Leibniz, they evidently do not acknowledge the presence of the opposing sense of distinctness in his thought. Rather, they maintain that when Leibniz speaks of distinct perceptions, the sense of distinctness he has in mind, at least typically, is opposed to a different sense of confusion (see, e.g., Wilson (1992), McRae (1976), and Parkinson (1982)). In Puryear (2006), I argue to the contrary that the "explicit content" sense of distinctness is not only present in Leibniz's thought, but constitutes his primary and considered conception of distinctness.

⁹I follow Leibniz's usual practice of using 'idea', 'concept', and 'notion' interchangeably. The terms are not strictly synonymous, but the differences in meaning are subtle and hold no significance for the present discussion. Cf. DM §27.

¹⁰In addition to Wilson (1997) and (1992, 339-40), see McRae (1976, 36, 128), Brandom (1981, 151ff.), Parkinson (1982, 15), Bennett (2001, 308), Simmons (2001, n. 41).

¹¹There are also texts in which Leibniz indicates that conceptual distinctness is the property of having explicit content. He writes that our ideas of sensible qualities "are clear, because we recognize them and easily tell them from one another; but they are not distinct, because we cannot distinguish their contents" (NE 255-56). Again, on his view our concepts of sensible qualities "are *clear*, for they help us to recognize the qualities, but ... these same notions are not *distinct*, because we can neither distinguish nor unfold what they contain" (G VI 500=AG 187). What prevents these ideas from being distinct, Leibniz says, is that we cannot discern their ingredients. (Cf. G III 454: "An idea is clear and distinct when we can understand all its parts.")

¹²Cf. McRae (1976, 37n.15); Wilson (1977, 327).

¹³Commentators have frequently observed that Leibniz faulted Descartes in this way, but what they have tended to miss is the significance of this move for understanding Leibniz's association of conceptual clarity and distinctness with levels of conceptual ability.

¹⁴Wilson observes that "on Leibniz's account sense perceptions do satisfy the original Cartesian conception of confusion. It is not the case that 'all that is in them' is clear to the perceiving mind" (1977, 325). The point I am making is that something even stronger is true: because for Leibniz sensory ideas are confused in the same way as sensory perceptions, *both* of these mental phenomena "satisfy the original Cartesian conception of confusion." Leibniz evidently recognized this point and that is why he remarked to Burnett that "my use of the terms 'clear' and 'distinct' does not depart from Descartes's" (G III 247=AG 287).

¹⁵In a 1699 letter to Thomas Burnett, Leibniz writes that "whenever we have a good definition, we have a distinct idea, for example when I say that green is a mixture of blue and yellow.... The notion that we have of green, which is a more composed color [than blue or yellow], is not only clear, but also distinct, because it is accompanied by a definition or analysis, by which this notion is resolved into certain requisites or ingredients. But that of blue is only clear and not distinct. It is clear, because we can recognize that which is blue or not, without making a mistake; but it is not distinct, for without the understanding, we do not know distinctly in what this I-know-not-what that we sense there consists" (G III 256). Here Leibniz erroneously supposes that the definition of green as a mixture of blue and yellow constitutes a *nominal* definition, and therefore that his idea of green is distinct. He corrects himself some five years later in the *New Essays*, when he explains that "terms which are simple only from our point of view because we have no way of analyzing them into the elementary perceptions which make them up—e.g. terms like hot, cold, yellow, green—do admit of real definitions which would explain what causes them. Thus the real definition of *green* is to be composed of a thorough mixture of blue and yellow; though green can no more be given a nominal definition, through which it could be recognized, than can blue or yellow" (NE 297). As Leibniz makes clear here, the definition of green as a mixture of yellow and blue is a *real* definition because in explaining how green is caused it establishes that green is possible. (Inasmuch as it explains how green arises, it is a *causal* definition.) But it is not a nominal definition because the property *mixture of yellow and blue* is not a distinguishing mark of green, since we can no more discern this property in the greenness of things than we can

discern the teeth of the cog-wheel in our confused perception of the transparent ring. Leibniz himself puts the point this way: “we now have a complete analysis of green into blue and yellow, and almost all our remaining questions about it concern these ingredients; yet we are quite unable to discern the ideas of blue and yellow within our sensory idea of green, simply because it is a confused idea” (NE 403). As this passage suggests, in the years following the letter to Burnett, Leibniz came to realize that possessing an analysis of green into yellow and blue does not change the fact that we cannot discern the ideas of those ingredients *in our idea of green*—that is, does not change the fact that the idea of green is confused—and therefore does not change the fact that we cannot give a nominal definition of green.

¹⁶I defend this claim more fully in Puryear (2006).

¹⁷Wilson considers Leibniz’s alleged distinction between the confusion proper to perceptions and that proper to ideas to constitute “a very fundamental advance” over Descartes’s philosophy (1977, 322). In distinguishing between these two kinds of confusion, she argues, Leibniz is in effect drawing a sharp distinction between conceptual abilities, which is what ideas and concepts are, and perceptions or particular perceivings—a distinction which in her opinion constitutes “one of the more satisfactory and historically significant features of Leibniz’s epistemology” and indeed can even be “construed as an important and perhaps influential antecedent to Kant’s celebrated distinction between intuitions and concepts” (ibid., 331, 322). Wilson is no doubt right that Leibniz distinguishes between ideas and perceptions, but in view of what has emerged in this section, it would be a mistake to cite as evidence for such a distinction the alleged fact that there are two quite different kinds of confusion, one proper to ideas and the other to perceptions. Equally, it would be a mistake to characterize the distinction between perceptions and ideas as a distinction between particular presentings and conceptual abilities, as Wilson does, on the ground that the sort of confusion applicable to perceptions has to do with certain (alleged) features of such presentings, whereas the sort of confusion applicable to ideas concerns levels of conceptual ability. Leibniz in fact has only one notion of confusion, equally applicable both to perceptions and ideas, and therefore his views about confusion cannot be used to drive a wedge between these two sorts of mental phenomena.

¹⁸An adumbration of this thesis can be found in Descartes’s Third Meditation, in the context of his taxonomy of ideas, where he claims to find within himself two ideas of the sun, one evidently derived from an external source through the senses,

the other from certain innate notions through astronomical reasoning (CSM II 27).

¹⁹See, e.g., NE 403-4, 487.

²⁰Cf., e.g., this remark from an essay *On the Elements of Natural Science*: “When we consider the subject of any confused attribute, for example, of light, its cause or the way in which it is produced or increased, or its contrary or the way it is destroyed or diminished, and finally, its effects, we do this by bringing it together with an aggregate of many other confused or distinct attributes taken together. But distinct attributes, namely duration, magnitude, motion, figure, angle, and other circumstances, are to be preferred to the rest” (L 287). (Note that Loemker renders the last sentence of this passage: “But distinct attributes are to be preferred to the rest, namely duration, magnitude, motion, figure, angle, and other circumstances” (L 287). This is an accurate translation of a misleading remark: Leibniz surely intends the attributes he lists here as examples of distinct attributes, and not of “the rest.” I have hence modified the translation to reconcile it with this fact.)

²¹Cf. NE 487: “So what holds us back is primarily the inadequacy of our knowledge of these distinct ideas concealed within the confused ones.”

²²Concerning the distinction between sensory and intellectual ideas, Leibniz writes: “Intellectual ideas, from which necessary truths arise, do not come from the senses; ...the ideas that come from the senses are confused; and so too, at least in part, are the truths which depend on them; whereas intellectual ideas, and the truths depending on them, are distinct, and neither originate in the senses; though it is true that without the senses we would never think of them” (NE 81). “Intellectual ideas, or ideas of reflection,” he later adds, “are drawn from our mind” (NE 86; cf. NE 51).

²³On the double-aspect view, see, e.g., Allison (2004).

²⁴My thanks to Nicholas Rescher, Mark Kulstad, Donald Rutherford, Sam Levey, and Timothy Crockett for stimulating comments on previous versions of this paper.