BOOK REVIEWS

Laurence B. McCullough, *Leibniz on Individuals and Individuation: The Persistence of Premodern Ideas in Modern Philosophy*. Dordrecht/Boston/London: Kluwer Academic Publishers, 1996. Pp. xv + 209.

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This book is divided into three parts. The first and by far the most substantial part is concerned to give an account of Leibniz's very first philosophical work, his Bachelor's dissertation of 1663, *Disputatio Metaphysica de Principio Individui*. The author locates Leibniz's argument in the context of late scholastic controversies concerning individuation and identifies some problems that arise for the position that Leibniz takes. In the second part, he makes and defends the claim that 'Leibniz adopts a principle of individuation in his mature philosophy that is the same as that which he adopts and defends in his earliest philosophy, namely self-individuated nature'. (p. 184) In the third and slightest part, it is argued that since the later Leibniz's ideas about individuation have their roots in late scholasticism, this raises problems about the use of the word 'modern' in relation to Leibniz. The author does not, however, conclude that this is a peculiar problem with Leibniz. Rather, he suggests that we should abandon such labels as 'modern' in the history of philosophy and—come to that—'post-modern' in cultural studies. This claim in relation to the 'self-serving' label 'post-modern' seems to have been added to provide some warrant for the book's inclusion in a series of 'Philosophical Studies in Contemporary Culture'. In fact, as those familiar with some of the author's Leibniz papers would expect, the volume is as devoid of interest for cultural studies students as it is full of interest for the serious student of Leibniz's philosophy.

This book should be valued as a unique guide to Leibniz's earliest known piece of philosophy. It rightly indicates, in my opinion, how some pre-occupations and philosophical intuitions retained a central place in his thinking. In particular, Laurence McCullough rightly stresses the metaphysical dimension of Leibniz's thought about individuals and individuation and rightly draws attention to ways in which this persists in his later philosophy at points where twentieth century commentators are tempted to think that logical and epistemological considerations hold sway. I think there is a case, too, for reading the later Leibniz, like the author of the *Disputatio*, as committed to an extreme nominalism. Furthermore, it seems to me, there is a good deal to be said for his two main claims about the continuity in

Leibniz's thought from his earliest scholastic exercise to his mature philosophy. But the book is far from satisfactory, as I shall try to explain. McCullough is unable, however, to resist the temptation to over-state that continuity and underplays the importance of other factors in Leibniz's intellectual development. He makes too little of the fact that Leibniz thought of himself as a modern and was committed, at least in some measure, to a modern critique of scholasticism. McCullough's account of the later philosophy of individuals and individuation is often over-simple and dogmatic. Moreover he overlooks a number of later passages that are explicitly and centrally about individuals and the principle of individuation. These passages, I will try to bring out, cast a different light on Leibniz's later attitude to the early *Disputatio* and its project of finding the principle of individuation.

The later Leibniz makes relatively few references to the principle of individuation and the fact that he provides no detailed account of it invites the inference that the problem which concerned him in his undergraduate dissertation ceased to interest him in later life. McCullough acknowledges the fact that Leibniz offered no 'detailed account' in his later writings but suggests this 'may be due to an assumption on his part that he had settled this matter years before—in 1663, to be precise' (p. 184). But, in the absence of any explicit endorsement of his earlier position and in the face of Leibniz's sometimes disparaging references to the scholastic principle, this explanation seems too simple. In one passage in the Fifth Letter to Clarke (§ 26), for instance, Leibniz complains against 'les philosophes vulgaires', whose superficial philosophy led them to suppose that there might be separate things in the universe that differed *solo numero*: 'it is from this mistake that their problems ("perplexités") arose concerning what they called "the principle of individuation".' In my 1984 book I took this complaint to be against the Scholastics generally and therefore I took Leibniz to have dissolved the problem with which he had been concerned in his early dissertation. McCullough is right to take me up on this (p. 186), though wrong to make nothing of Leibniz's frequent criticisms of the 'vulgar philosophers'. It still seems to me that in this letter Leibniz was dissolving the problem at least *some* scholastics had and that he had come to regard the search for the principle of individuation as itself problematic. But I now realise that this is consistent with his believing that *other* scholastics had worthwhile things to say about this topic. In the *New Essays*, indeed, he pays tribute at one point (A VI vi 431) to 'the deeper Scholastics, such as Suarez' and gives an instructive list of the topics on which he credits them with having offered 'substantial discussions'. The principle of individuation is on that list. This contrast, between the superficial

philosophy of the common run of scholastics and the deeper thought of a select few of them, is crucial to a proper understanding of Leibniz's attitude to scholasticism. It shows that it is as wrong to ignore Leibniz's modern critique of scholasticism, as McCullough does, as it would be to treat Leibniz as if his philosophy took over from the Cartesians and owed nothing to the scholastic tradition.

Once Leibniz is considered as a 'modern' critic of scholasticism it becomes much easier to see why, in his later philosophy, he tended to disparage, play down or simply make no reference to the principle of individuation. By 'modern' standards of intelligibility, Leibniz's thesis that the 'whole entity' is the principle of individuation and indeed much of the debate about the problem is characterised by just that obscurity that he himself sometimes complained of in the scholastics, including Suarez (for his *influxus physicus*). Yet Leibniz often admired deep but obscure philosophers (Plato, the Kabbalists and F.M. van Helmont, for instance, not to mention certain of the scholastics) and identified as a worthwhile task that of capturing their insights in a more intelligible, systematic and defensible form. It seems plausible to suppose that this is how he later positioned himself in relation to his own undergraduate dissertation. Certainly he once defended it (in a letter to Conring of 19 March, 1678) as containing 'original and profound comments'. And indeed some of his later remarks about the principle of individuation seem to involve salvaging something intelligible where otherwise it would be dismissed. For instance, in the *New Essays*, he alludes to the 'internal principle of distinction' to which, he says, the principle of individuation 'reduces' (A VI vi 230).[1] This is not the *entitas tota* of the *Disputatio*—though that was, in its way, an internal principle—but seems to be something like the 'complete concept' or complete individual 'nature' of the *Discourse* and other writings of the late 1680s. Leibniz seems to me here to be engaging in a reductionist manoeuvre in relation to the scholastic principle he wishes to salvage from total dismissal. But the reduction does *not* mean changing the principle of individuation into a logical or epistemological principle. For Leibniz held that the universe consists of individuals whose nature, as he put it to Arnauld in a letter of May, 1686, it is to be 'complete or determined'.

McCullough provides only a limited discussion of the later theory of individuals. Some of the fundamental elements of that theory, like unity, do seem, as he claims, to be directly connected with assumptions of the *Disputatio*. But others, like indestructibility, seem to derive from later developments. For others the obscurity of the *Disputatio* makes it difficult to decide exactly what it implies. Thus, for instance, it is tempting to suppose that the young Leibniz must have already

held the principle of the identity of indiscernibles since his principle of individuation seems to presuppose it. But it seems only to have been later that Leibniz became clear about the former principle and confident about its rational basis. A battery of later principles—the identity of indiscernibles and sufficient reason, in particular—is deployed by the later Leibniz and the principle of individuation, where it is mentioned at all, is apt to be brought in as a corollary (see, for instance, G vii 481) or a presupposition of the principle of the identity of indiscernibles.

McCullough does not entirely ignore the later discussions of the principle of individuation. He twice (pp. 17 and 145) quotes the passage in the *New Essays* where Leibniz claims: 'If two individuals were perfectly similar and equal, in short, *indistinguishable* in themselves, there would be no principle of individuation.' (A VI vi 230) He acknowledges that the passage represents an important change in Leibniz's view of individuals and that he now regards 'distinction' as 'fundamental to the intension of individuality' and 'on an equal footing with indivisibility' (p. 145). But he does not consider that the principle of individuation only surfaces in this discussion because Philonous, echoing Locke, introduces it. Theophilus, for Leibniz, 'reduces' the principle to his principle of internal distinction between all individuals and subordinates it to the principle of the identity of indiscernibles.

The most extensive and perhaps the most important post-*Disputatio* discussion by Leibniz of the principle of individuation—entirely overlooked by McCullough—is in the short paper of 1 April 1676 entitled (by Leibniz himself) '*Meditatio de principio individui*' and included in editions of what is now usually called the *De Summa Rerum*.[2] (A VI iii 490f., *Parkinson*, pp. 50-53) This paper appears to be the first in which Leibniz endorses the principle of the identity of indiscernibles and recognises that the principle of individuation presupposes it. The principle of individuation cannot, he claims, be 'outside the thing'. Here he already seems close to the critical position Theophilus argues for in the *New Essays* (A VI vi 230f.) that, 'if two individuals were ... *indistinguishable* in themselves, there would be no principle of individuation'. Insisting on an 'internal principle' of individuation is consistent with what Leibniz maintained in his undergraduate dissertation. But it is clear that Leibniz has moved beyond his earlier work and that, in the 1676 paper, he holds that it is the *mind*— in that curious sense in which he then held that every piece of matter had a 'mind'—which is the principle of individuation. Moreover, his reason for supposing that minds will serve the purpose is that a mind 'will retain the effect of its former state'. (Parkinson, *De Summa Rerum*, p. 51) Minds, indeed, are (according to another piece from early 1676) 'omniscient in a confused

way', since 'any mind perceives simultaneously whatever happens in the entire world'. (Parkinson, *De Summa Rerum*, p. 85) This gives rise to a 'wonderful variety' since 'there are as many different relations of things as there are minds'. Leibniz seems already to hold that each individual mind perceives the world from a unique point of view and makes one of his earliest uses of the well-known analogy with 'the same town' as 'seen from various places'. His argument at this point is transformed by Neoplatonic considerations to do with plenitude of the world (the title of the piece) and harmony. By this time, it seems to me, Leibniz is giving priority to his principles of sufficient reason, perfection and the identity of indiscernibles and has moved a long way from his 1663 dissertation.

McCullough does not deny that there are significant changes in Leibniz's theory of individuals in his later writings. He acknowledges, for instance, an important shift from a 'static' to a 'dynamic' conception of the individual, which he dates from his work on transubstantiation of around 1668. He acknowledges too that the *Disputatio* offers an overly 'formulaic' account and that the later philosophy gives content to the 'whole entity' as the principle of individuation which it lacked in his undergraduate work. This view might be maintained if minds, or whatever replaces them in the theory, can be said to be to be the 'whole entity', i.e., if the individuals accommodated within the theory *are* minds (or whatever). This might explain why McCullough embraces dogmatically the claim that Leibniz's 'mature ontology contains only nonmaterial substances'. (p. 17) That claim, however, is not supported by the '*Meditatio de principio individui*', where Leibniz holds that 'matter will have a mind' and his related discussions of that period make it clear that he then held that there are both material and nonmaterial substances (individuals). His view at this stage seems to have been that an essential *part* of the entity was its principle of individuation. By the time of the *Discourse on Metaphysics* he seems to have moved on to the view that it is the *complete concept* of an individual substance (neither the whole entity nor part of it) by which it is individuated. And I think something like that view is in the background of Leibniz's later philosophy. However that may be, it is very doubtful whether, as McCullough maintains, Leibniz's later ontology contains only non-material substances. On the contrary, there are many passages which insist that no finite immaterial substances, even angels, are complete without matter and an organic body. That seems to be the spirit in which Leibniz once wrote: 'What I call a complete monad or individual substance [*substantial singularis*] is not so much the soul, as it is the animal itself, or something analogous to it, endowed with a soul or form and an organic body'.[3]

This is, however, not the place to dispute the large question of Leibniz's alleged idealism. It is sufficient to voice a complaint that McCullough takes sides on this matter without taking account of the primary or—I may add (without whingeing, since he is generous in his attention to my writings)—the considerable secondary literature on this subject. The book lacks a bibliography and, were one to construct a bibliography from the notes given at the end of each chapter, it would be a patchy one.

As to the other main claim made in this book, that 'Leibniz's modernism ... does not run deep and so we should henceforth abandon the label in reading his texts' (p. 190), little more need be said. I quite agree that there are many points at which Leibniz's later philosophizing is continuous with that of his youthful exercise in scholastic theory. But there is, I suggest, a stronger case for giving some weight to the label 'modern' in thinking about Leibniz than there is for some other over-freely used labels (like 'rationalist'). For the word 'modern' is not only, as McCullough seems to suppose, a label used by historians of philosophy. It is one that reflects how some philosophers of the past, Leibniz included, thought of themselves. Leibniz, to be sure, dissociated himself from just the tendency McCullough seems to connect with the label 'modern', namely, with a rejection of the philosophical tradition. But his commitment to the mechanical philosophy, for instance, was self-consciously 'modern'. So was his related emphasis on clarity, to which I have already referred. Thus, while he often wanted to defend the scholastics against moderns who were inclined to be overly dismissive (as, for instance, he thought Locke was), he himself remained committed to a modern critique, one which is relevant to our understanding of his later remarks about the principle of individuation.

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[1] In quoting from the *New Essays* I use the translation by Remnant and Bennett published by Cambridge University Press.

[2] In referring to these papers I have used G.H.R. Parkinson's translations in the

Yale edition of the *De Summa Rerum: Metaphysical Papers, 1675-76.*

[3] In a letter to Johann Bernoulli dated 20/30 September, 1698, GM iii 542. Quoted from AG, p. 168.