

Monism, Separability and Real Distinction in the Young Leibniz*

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Abstract

In this article, I discuss how Leibniz's first correspondence with Malebranche from early 1676 can shed new light on the notorious "all-things-are-one"-passage (ATOP) found in the *Quod ens perfectissimum sit possibile* from late 1676—a passage that has been taken as an expression of monism or Spinozism in the young Leibniz. The correspondence with Malebranche provides a deeper understanding of Leibniz's use of the notions of "real distinction" and "separability" in the ATOP. This forms the background for a discussion of Leibniz's *commitment* to the monist position expounded in the ATOP. Thus, on the basis of a close analysis of Leibniz's use of these key terms in the Malebranche correspondence, I provide two possible, and contrary, interpretations of the ATOP, namely, a "non-commitment account" and a "commitment account." Finally, I explain why I consider the commitment account to be the more compelling of the two.

1. Introduction¹

Anyone following the central debates in Leibniz studies over the last two decades is familiar with the notorious "all-things-are-one passage" (hereafter ATOP) contained in the fragment titled *Quod ens perfectissimum sit possibile*, written around November 1676:

It can easily be demonstrated that all things are distinguished, not as substances [above the word "substances," Leibniz notes: *radicaliter*, i.e. "radically"] but as modes. This can be demonstrated from the fact that, of those things which are radically different [*radicaliter distincta*], one can be perfectly understood without another; that is, all the requisites of the one can be understood without the requisites of the other being understood. But in the case of things, this is not so; for since the ultimate reason of things is unique, and contains by itself the aggregate of all requisites of all things, it is evident that the requisites of all things are the same. So also is their essence, given that an essence is the aggregate of all primary requisites. Therefore the essence of all things is the same, and things differ only modally, just as a town seen from a high point

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differs from the town seen from a plain. If only those things are really different [*realiter differunt*] which can be separated [*separari*], or, of which one can be perfectly understood without the other, it follows that no thing really differs from another [*nihil realiter ab altero differe*], but that all things are one, just as Plato argues in the *Parmenides*.²

This passage, contained in the set of metaphysical fragments known as the *De summa rerum*, could suggest that Leibniz at this point of his philosophical development was toying with a monist metaphysics very different from his mature pluralist metaphysics, maybe inspired by his exchanges with Ehrenfried Walther von Tschirnhaus regarding Spinoza's philosophy in 1675-1676. This is indeed what Mark Kulstad, Robert M. Adams and others, including myself, have maintained, although we attribute to Leibniz different degrees of assurance and commitment to the truly Spinozistic implications of this monism.³ In contrast, it has been strongly contested by Christia Mercer that Spinozism is in any significant way important for Leibniz's position in the *De summa rerum*, and that we should not take passages that "smack" a bit of Spinozism to indicate any deviation from his chosen Platonic path.⁴ I have argued elsewhere, mainly on textual grounds, that it is impossible to separate this passage from Leibniz's interest in Spinozism in the mid-1670s, and that it *must* involve some degree of sympathy to Spinoza's position, regardless of whether this is compatible with his alleged Platonist commitments.⁵ In the following, I will not return to the wealth of arguments evoked over the years for and against Leibniz's early "monism," "pantheism" or "Spinozism." Instead, I will try to shed new light on this passage by reading it in light of Leibniz's first exchange of letters with Malebranche from 1676.⁶ The ATOP has not been compared previously to this correspondence which, after having stumbled upon it not too long ago, I found it difficult to ignore in this context.⁷ I will proceed as follows: I will first discuss in some detail what Leibniz says in his correspondence with Malebranche that might be of interest for the interpretation of the ATOP. Next, I will develop a possible objection to the Spinoza-like monism thesis that could be prompted by a comparison with the early Malebranche correspondence, concerning Leibniz's *commitment* to the thesis developed in the ATOP. Finally, I will reply to this possible objection.

2. The Correspondence with Malebranche in 1676

As should be evident from simply reading the ATOP, the notions "real distinction," "separability," and " requisite" play an important role in the argument Leibniz

develops in the passage. Mark Kulstad has attempted to elucidate Leibniz's position regarding real and radical distinction in the ATOP by comparing it to Descartes' notion of real distinction.⁸ To my knowledge however, nobody has yet considered it in light of an exchange between Leibniz and Malebranche, which probably took place only a few months before Leibniz wrote the ATOP, and which is centered around these same notions of "real distinction," "separability" and "requisite." The exchange consists of three letters: the first from Leibniz, the second Malebranche's reply, and a third letter from Leibniz. The correspondence followed a verbal exchange on "this most agitated question whether space is really distinct from matter, if there can be a vacuum, or if it is more likely that everything extended is matter."⁹ Leibniz hoped to continue this discussion through correspondence since "one cannot reflect enough on all things in the heat of discussion, unless one submits oneself to rigorous laws, which would be too bothersome [*trop ennuyeux*]."¹⁰ Although interesting, it is not the discussion concerning the relations between space and matter *per se* which will retain our interest in this context, but rather the discussion of the notions of separability and real distinction occasioned by it.

2.1. The first letter to Malebranche

In his first letter to Malebranche, Leibniz argues against the idea that "two really distinct things are separable."¹¹ More precisely, as we shall see, he argues, not that really distinct things are never separable, but that two really distinct things are not *always* separable. Hence, it is possible to conceive of things which are really distinct and yet inseparable. Leibniz, then, *contra* Malebranche, denies that real distinction necessarily entails separability. He develops the objection in the following manner:

It appears to me that your proof can be reduced to the following:

- (1) Two really distinct things can be perfectly understood, one without the other. I add this word: *perfectly*, because I think it corresponds to your opinion.
- (2) Two things which are perfectly intelligible one without the other can be one without the other, that is, they are separable.
- (3) Thus, two really distinct things are separable.

I have meditated on this, and here is how I still agree with the second proposition of this prosyllogism: if to *understand perfectly* a thing is to understand all the sufficient requisites for its constitution, then I agree with this proposition, that

is: when all the sufficient requisites for constituting a thing can be understood without understanding all the requisites sufficient for constituting the other, the one can be without the other. But in this way I do not agree with the 1st proposition of this prosyllogism, i.e. that if two things are really distinct all the requisites of the one can always be understood without understanding all the requisites of the other.¹²

First, we should consider the distinction between real distinction and separability. According to premise (1) *real distinction* (*RD*) refers in some way to the *conceivability* of things. From premise (2) it appears that separability (*SEP*) refers in some way to the *being* of things.

We encounter some terminological difficulties in this context. While “real distinction” was a much-discussed concept at the time, “separability” does not figure on the standard list of conceptually charged terms in seventeenth century rationalism (although, as we shall see, Descartes did appeal to the notion on several occasions.) More importantly, it is not a term I have found Leibniz using in any systematic sense in earlier or later writings. There is reason to believe that Leibniz only employs it because Malebranche had used it during their conversation, thus accepting the terminological premises of his interlocutor in accordance with his usual “rhetoric of attraction,” as Mercer has aptly dubbed it.¹³

If this is the case, Malebranche undoubtedly picked up the term from Descartes. Kulstad has pointed to Descartes’ *Second Replies* as an alternative plausible source for the term.¹⁴ Thus, in his “geometrical exposition” at the end of the replies, Descartes provides the following definition: “Two substances are said to be really distinct when each of them can exist apart from the other.”¹⁵ Kulstad is certainly correct in pointing to this text as a possible source for Leibniz’s concept of ontological “separability.” The conjecture does, however, involve a small problem. In Descartes’ text, the quoted statement figures as a *definition* ($RD = SEP$). Leibniz’s letter suggests, however, that we should not take separability as the *definition* of real distinction. Rather, we should see the two notions as *different*, but *closely related*. Thus, if Descartes’ *Second Replies* are indeed the source of Leibniz’s concept of separability, then Leibniz is misrepresenting Descartes’ *definition* (i.e. $SEP = RD$) as if it was an *entailment* relation (i.e. $SEP \rightarrow RD$). Leibniz’s use of the terms corresponds better to the view Descartes propounds in *Principles of Philosophy*, I, § 60. Here, Descartes provides an epistemological rather than ontological definition of real distinction, namely that two things are really distinct if they can be clearly and distinctly understood one without the other (I will return to this definition in more

detail below.)¹⁶ Next, towards the end of the same paragraph, Descartes explains that “things which God has the power to separate, or to keep in being separately, are really distinct.”¹⁷ In this case, as in Leibniz’s letter, the relation between separability and real distinction is one of entailment, not identification or definition.¹⁸

Be that as it may, on Leibniz’s account of Malebranche’s position, the criterion for real distinction is something we can call mutual cognitive independence (*MCI*), whereas the criterion for separability is mutual ontological independence (*MOI*). This provides us with the following (provisional) definitions:

MCI: x and y are mutually cognitively independent iff x can be perfectly understood without y and y without x .

RD: x and y are really distinct iff they are *MCI*.

MOI: x and y are mutually ontologically independent iff x can be without y and y without x .

SEP: x and y are separable iff they are *MOI*.

We recall that, in his letter, Leibniz is giving an account of Malebranche’s argument according to which real distinction necessarily *entails* separability ($RD \rightarrow SEP$). The argument relies on the notion that real *RD* is nothing but *MCI*, and *SEP* nothing but *MOI*. We can formalize what Leibniz takes Malebranche’s position to be as follows:

$$RD = MCI \rightarrow MOI = SEP$$

Leibniz, however, *denies* that this entailment relation is valid. For him, real distinction does *not* necessarily entail separability.

The reasons Leibniz provides for this relate not so much to the idea that *MOI* is entailed by *MCI*, or that *MOI* is the definition of *SEP*, but rather to the identification of *RD* with *MCI*. He agrees with Premise (2), namely, that “two things which are perfectly intelligible one without the other [i.e. *MCI*] can be one without the other [i.e. *MOI*], that is, they are separable [i. e. *SEP*].” However, he contests Premise (1) according to which “two really distinct things [i.e. *RD*] can be perfectly understood, one without the other [i.e. *MCI*].” That is, he rejects the idea that *RD* is the same as *MCI*. Leibniz’s argument then, is the following:

1. $MCI \rightarrow MOI = SEP$

2. However, $RD \neq MCI$

3. Therefore one cannot conclude from $MCI \rightarrow MOI = SEP$ that $RD \rightarrow SEP$

Let us consider in further detail Leibniz’s explanation. First, we should notice Leibniz’s introduction of the notion of “requisites” in the passage quoted above. This is a distinctly Leibnizian notion (although he probably originally found it in

Hobbes.)¹⁹ It is part of his philosophical vocabulary at least since the *Demonstratio propositionum primarum* (1671-72) and the *Confessio philosophi* (1672-73). Consider the following passages in these two early texts where Leibniz employs the term:

- [1] Proposition: Nothing is without a reason, i.e. everything that exists has a sufficient reason.
Definition 1. A sufficient reason of some thing is such that, when posited, the thing exists.
Definition 2. A requisite of some thing is such that, when not posited, the thing does not exist.
Demonstration:
Whatever exists has all its requisites.
For, if one is not posited, the thing does not exist per Definition 2.
All requisites having been posited, the thing exists.
For, if the thing does not exist, something will be lacking in virtue of which it does not exist, i.e. a requisite.
Therefore, all the requisites constitute a sufficient reason per Definition 1.²⁰
- [2] Whatever exists, at any rate, will have all the requisites for existing; however, all the requisites for existing taken together at the same time are a *sufficient reason for existing*. Therefore, whatever exists has a sufficient reason for existing.²¹

As is clear, the concept of a “requisite” is closely linked to that of a “sufficient reason.” There are numerous other texts that confirm this, especially from the period when the first epistolary exchange with Malebranche took place.²² A requisite is a part of the sufficient reason of a thing and, conversely, the reason of a thing is defined by the total aggregate of its requisites. The reason of a thing is that without which it cannot be conceived. The requisites of a thing can thus be defined as the conditions of conceivability of this thing. Leibniz also calls this the “essence” of the thing in *Quod ens perfectissimum sit possibile*, in the passage which follows immediately after the ATOP: “An ultimate reason is the aggregate of all sufficient requisites. The aggregate of sufficient requisites is the essence.”²³

It is in light of the introduction of the term “requisite” that we must understand Leibniz’s rejection of the identification of *RD* with *MCI*. For it is by means of this term that Leibniz suggests a special definition of *MCI*, namely what he calls *perfect MCI*: “When all the sufficient requisites for constituting a thing can be understood

without understanding all the requisites sufficient for constituting the other.” This conception of mutual cognitive independence we can call *MCIp*:

MCIp: x and y are *perfectly* cognitively independent iff all the requisites of x can be conceived without all the requisites of y, and all the requisites of y without the requisites of x.

Whereas the traditional Cartesian conception of *RD* and *MCI* requires the independent conception of the terms involved, Leibniz gives the notion of *MCI* an additional turn by maintaining that *MCI* requires the independent conception of all that which forms the respective conditions of conceivability of the terms involved. If we follow this stronger definition of *MCI* (i.e. *MCIp*) and since the entailment relation $MCIp \rightarrow MOI = SEP$ still holds, it is clear that what is required for the separability of a thing x from a thing y is that they have *no common requisites*, but that all the requisites of x can be conceived without any of the requisites of y, and *vice versa*. When Leibniz then proceeds to *deny* that real distinction is identical *MCIp*, this seems to imply that two *really distinct* things *can* have requisites in common. That is why two things which are really distinct with regard to their *being conceived* may *not* be separable, i.e. ontologically distinct, because this requires mutual independence, not only with regard to their *being conceived*, but also with regard to their *requisites* or *conceptual conditions of conceivability*, i.e. perfect mutual cognitive independence or *MCIp*.

Hence, Leibniz holds that ontological separability requires a much stronger form of mutual cognitive independence than is entailed by real distinction. We need *more* than real distinction in order to say that two things, x and y, are separable and, conversely, what is not separable is not necessarily not really distinct. There can be a real distinction between things which have common conditions of conceivability, i.e. there can be things which can be conceived independently from each other, while their conceptual conditions of conceivability may not be conceived independently.²⁴

2.2. The Second letter to Malebranche

In his second letter to Malebranche, Leibniz reiterates his doubts that “*separability* follows from *real distinction*.”²⁵ First he addresses a distinction between “absolute beings [*estres absolus*]” and “modes of being [*manieres d’estre*]” or “respective beings [*estres respectifs*]” proposed by Malebranche in order to account for the

separability of really distinct things. Concerning this distinction, Leibniz writes:

This is a very good distinction. But it still remains for you to prove that two beings such as the parts of space do not have any requisites. According to me everything which can be produced has external *requisites*, namely those which concurred with the production of it. But the parts of space are produced by the movement of the body which cuts it up. Hence, they have requisites. You, however, attempt to prove the contrary in the following manner:

The parts of extension are not modes of being, or respective beings, but absolute beings.

Absolute beings have a simple idea.

The things whose idea is simple do not have any requisites.

Thus the parts of space do not have any requisites.

In the way you explain what you call absolute Beings through this piece of reasoning, I find myself obliged not to grant that the parts in question are absolute beings: in fact, only God and his perfections and attributes are absolute in that sense.²⁶

Leibniz argues that all things that *can be produced* have some requisites, namely that which concurs in producing them. In context—i.e. the problem whether parts of space are absolute beings or not—Leibniz provides as an example the *movement* of bodies which “cut up” space. In this case, movement is a requisite of space having parts. He gives this example in order to rebuke Malebranche’s claim that different parts of space are absolute, i.e. simple, and have no requisites that they might share with other things. We need not go further into the details of this discussion which is not relevant for the interpretation of the ATOP.

More importantly, Leibniz goes on to claim that only God and his attributes are absolute in Malebranche’s sense, namely, have complete independence from anything else with regard to their requisites or conditions of conceivability.²⁷ God then is the only being without (external) requisites.²⁸ At the same time, Leibniz says something about the mode of existence of all that which is *not* absolute but relative, namely that any thing that is *not* God has external requisites. We can sum up his thought as follows: all things produced have as a condition of conceivability the first cause which concurred in their production, therefore, only God and God’s perfections are absolute since they have no external cause and hence no external requisites. Moreover, everything that exists and is not God has at least one *common* external requisite—God. Thus, Leibniz’s argument concerning the “relativity” of all beings except God is related to the traditional theological idea that all things

created are both existentially and conceptually dependent on their creator.²⁹

On this point, it is interesting to consider Leibniz's annotations from around April 1676 to Spinoza's so-called "Letter on the infinite" (Letter 12). Spinoza's letter contains a discussion of the cosmological proof of God developed by Chasdai Crescas, according to whom "the force of this argument [lies] in the supposition that things which do not exist necessarily by their own nature are not determined to exist by a thing which does necessarily exist by its own nature."³⁰ Leibniz agrees:

This is rightly observed, and agrees with what I am accustomed to saying, that nothing exists but that for whose existence a sufficient reason can be provided [...]. From these considerations a truly memorable thing also follows, that what is earlier in the series of causes is not nearer to the Reason for the universe, i.e. to the First being, than what is later, nor is the First Being the reason for the later ones as a result of the mediation of the earlier ones; rather it is the reason for all of them equally immediately.³¹

Without delving too deeply into this fascinating "exchange" between Leibniz and Spinoza,³² it is important to note that Leibniz describes God as the "first cause" in the sense that God is the *sufficient reason* of all things since God is a common requisite for them all. I believe this corresponds to the position that he is also endorsing concerning God as an "absolute being" and creatures as "relative beings" in the second letter to Malebranche.

3. How to read the ATOP

Let us now return in greater detail to the ATOP and consider the passage in light of our analysis of the exchange with Malebranche. As I mentioned earlier I will not discuss whether the position Leibniz develops in the ATOP is monist or not. I have no doubt that it is in some sense, and even that it is monist in a sense Leibniz himself believed had Spinozistic implications. Our focus will be to determine the degree to which Leibniz was wedded to this position, and to consider whether the correspondence with Malebranche sheds light on this question.

3.1. The non-commitment account

Let us first see how a comparison with the Malebranche correspondence could lead one to think that Leibniz is *not* committed to the view he exposes in the ATOP. We can call this the non-commitment account of the ATOP. Consider the end of

the passage:

If only those things are really different which can be separated, or [*seu*], of which one can be perfectly understood without the other, it follows that no thing really differs from another, but that all things are one [...].

In other words, *if* we maintain that there are no really distinct things (*RD*) which are not also perfectly mutually cognitively independent (*MCIp*), and thus (on account of the *seu*) also separable (*MOI*), *then* there are no really distinct things. This follows from the distinction between things and God. As we have seen, in the second letter to Malebranche, Leibniz argues that nothing other than God is absolute, or conceived through itself, since all things other than God are conceived through God. In the ATOP, Leibniz employs a similar argument to say that, insofar as he is the *ultima ratio rerum*, God contains the requisites of all things: “[...] since the ultimate reason of things is unique, and contains by itself the aggregate of all requisites of all things, it is evident that the requisites of all things are the same [...]” Leibniz then, establishes in the ATOP the following: a doctrine which maintains that only ontologically separable things are conceptually really distinct, or which maintains that only things which are distinct with regard to the *conditions* of conceivability are really distinct, must also admit that no things are really distinct but that all things are the same, since all things have a common condition of conceivability, namely God. In other words, *if* perfect mutual cognitive independence with regard to requisites—i.e. *MCIp*, insofar as it can be immediately deduced from *SEP*—is a requirement for real distinction, then nothing is really distinct (*RD*).

The crucial word here is of course the “*if*”. For, as we have seen, in his correspondence with Malebranche, Leibniz *denies* that mutual cognitive independence with regard to requisites (*MCIp*) is a necessary requirement for real distinction (*RD*), since he *denies* that all really distinct things are separable (*SEP*), while *affirming* that all things which are *MCIp* are *SEP*. Hence, if we assume that Leibniz did not change his mind concerning real distinction and separability between the correspondence with Malebranche and the ATOP, then this strongly suggests that he is *not* committed to the hypothesis he develops in the ATOP. He only develops the consequences of a view that he does *not* agree with, namely that two things are *RD*, if and only if they are *SEP*. If this indeed is how the passage should be read, then the ATOP is not evidence of any Spinoza-like monism in the young Leibniz. It must rather be seen as a commentary on a position like Malebranche’s, which seeks to elucidate the consequences of such a position *vis à vis* monism. Thus, Leibniz could appear to be showing in the ATOP that if one holds with Malebranche

that all really distinct things are separable, one commits oneself to a Spinoza-like monism. In that case, it is possible to consider the ATOP as an early expression of Leibniz's suspicion that a position such as Malebranche's has Spinozist implications or consequences, although the suspicion would be grounded in somewhat different philosophical considerations than the ones we find in the later texts such as the *De ipsa natura* from 1698.³³

3.2. The commitment account

It is worthwhile, however, to consider whether we really ought to take Leibniz as employing the concept of real distinction in the same sense in the Malebranche correspondence and in the ATOP. Despite the fact that these texts are probably written with only a few months interval, I believe we should not.

The problem with the non-commitment account of the ATOP developed above is primarily that it leaves us without a satisfactory definition of real distinction. To be sure, we have the definition Leibniz attributes to Malebranche in his first letter, i.e. that real distinction is identical to *MCI*. In this context however, Leibniz *rejects* that definition. In fact, all we learn is that real distinction *cannot* be identified with *MCI*, if *MCI* is taken as *MCIp*. We are left with the following: *if we do not take RD in the sense of MCIp, which in this context Leibniz thinks we should not, then RD does not entail SEP. But what is RD then? So far, we do not know, because the correspondence with Malebranche in itself gives us very little to go by. The ATOP also provides a definition of real distinction (assuming Leibniz uses the term "radically" as synonymous to the term "really"), since he writes: "of those things which are radically different [i. e. RD], one can be perfectly understood without another; that is, all the requisites of the one can be understood without the requisites of the other being understood [i. e. MCIp]."* However, this is the definition of real distinction that the non-commitment reading of the ATOP would *deny* corresponds to Leibniz's own position on *RD*. So, on the non-commitment reading, we have no idea what Leibniz's own definition of real distinction is or *why* he will not commit himself to the idea that *RD* requires *MCIp*.

To address this question, we should take into account that, in the first letter to Malebranche, Leibniz insists on speaking of *MCIp* as the distinction between things which can be "perfectly understood one without the other." He insists strongly on adding the term "perfectly": "I add this word, perfectly, because I believe it corresponds to your opinion." The reason why he does that might very well be

because, during the discussion preceding the correspondence, Malebranche had suggested or implied some *other* possible conception of *MCI* than the “perfect” one (i.e. *MCIp*), and which *is* indeed required to have *RD*. Now, it is plausible that Leibniz and Malebranche had discussed these issues on the basis of *Descartes’* conception of real distinction which we can attribute to Malebranche as well, at least with respect to the aspects of it which are relevant here (more on this point below.) Descartes defines real distinction as follows:

Strictly speaking, a *real* distinction exists only between two or more substances; and we can perceive that two substances are really distinct simply from the fact that *we can clearly and distinctly understand one apart from the other*.³⁴

According to Descartes’ definition, two things are really distinct if they can be conceived *clearly and distinctly* one without the other.

It is possible that Leibniz only denies that this *Cartesian* conception of *RD* entails separability in the correspondence with Malebranche. In that case we would have an explanation why there is no definition given of *RD*. Indeed, in the context of the correspondence, Leibniz takes the definition of *RD* for granted and does not explain it further *because he uses the notion in a sense which is well-known and endorsed by Malebranche*. This notion of real distinction is based on an understanding of *MCI* which refers to the clarity and distinctness of conception:

MCIc&d: x and y are mutually cognitively independent iff x can be *clearly and distinctly* understood without y and y without x.

Leibniz however, does *not* agree that clarity and distinctness can account for the *perfect* understanding of mutual independence required for *SEP*, and this is the point he is trying to convince Malebranche about in the first letter. According to Leibniz, in order for two things to be “perfectly” understood one without the other, not only must they be in such a way that they can be understood one without the other clearly and distinctly, but they must be in such a way that the *requisites* of the one can be understood without the *requisites* of the other, i.e. *MCIp*. Hence, on this reading, in the Malebranche correspondence, Leibniz maintains that there are things we can understand *clearly and distinctly* one without the other, i.e. which are really distinct in the Cartesian sense, but that this does *not* necessarily imply that they are completely conceptually distinct in the strong sense of not having any requisites in common. For this reason, since *SEP* hinges on the consideration of requisites (*MCIp*), and Cartesian *RD* hinges on the consideration of clarity and distinction (*MCIc&d*), Cartesian *RD* does not entail *SEP*. One cannot deduce the separability of things from the fact that they are really distinct in the Cartesian sense.

We might at this point encounter the following possible objection concerning Malebranche's presumed position. Is it at all plausible to think that Malebranche's notion of real distinction is identical to the Cartesian one, i.e. based on *MCIc&d*? In fact, there is overwhelming evidence that Malebranche no less than Leibniz deemed the general Cartesian truth-criterion, i.e. clarity and distinctness, too subjective and wanted to replace it with another one, namely a criterion grounded in his theory of the *vision in God*. Malebranche no less than Leibniz (as we will see below) attacked the Cartesian conception of clarity and distinction as being too psychological to provide a reliable truth-criterion. As Martial Gueroult notes, this is even the very key to understanding Malebranche's philosophical project, which was to "break the circle of psychological relativism inside of which Descartes [...] blocked the road of metaphysics."³⁵ This does not imply, however, that Malebranche contests the Cartesian criterion of truth as such. For him, it is still clearness and distinctness which form the touch stone of truth. Clarity and distinctness, however, do not for Malebranche have their source in the nature of the knowing subject like in Descartes, where the truth-criterion is derived directly from the self-certainty of the *cogito*.³⁶ For Malebranche, it is rather a form of objective and ideal clarity, i.e. the vision in God. Thus, according to the *Recherche de la vérité*, "it is God Himself who enlightens philosophers in the knowledge that ungrateful men call natural though they receive it only from heaven."³⁷ The mind "cannot enlighten itself," he argues against the "Cartesian gentlemen."³⁸ As Gueroult comments: "our understanding is doubtlessly the clarity of our mind; the light in us. But this clarity which is in us does not stem from ourselves. Thus, our soul is not by itself understanding: it becomes so under the impact of this clarity that it receives."³⁹ Hence, in relation to Descartes, Malebranche does not dispute the truth-criterion as such, i.e. clarity and distinction, but only its *source*.

If this holds generally about Malebranche's theory of truth, it must also hold regarding the way Malebranche has recourse to this theory in his discussion of real distinction. The only other explicit discussion of real distinction I have come upon in Malebranche's works tends to confirm this conclusion. It appears almost forty years after the discussion with Leibniz in Malebranche's correspondence with Dortous de Mairan. This important exchange of letters concerns the thorny issue of the relations between occasionalism and Spinozism. Dortous de Mairan had suggested that Malebranche's notion of "intelligible extension" is tainted with Spinozism. Not surprisingly, Malebranche was trying very hard to refute that suggestion. Without getting into the details of this discussion,⁴⁰ we should note the

following:

Dortous de Mairan, in his letter from 6 May 1714, attempts to defend Spinoza against a critique of *Ethics* I, propositions 4 and 5, which had been advanced by François Lamy in *Le Nouvel athéisme renversé* from 1696:

In it, the author [i.e. Spinoza] proves in a concise and metaphysical way that two or more distinct things cannot be distinguished except by a diversity of their attributes or their modifications; and he based this on [the fact] that everything which is, is in itself or in something else, i.e. is substance or mode. Regarding that, it can be objected that he confounds diversity and distinction; that substances of a same attribute or a same essence can be distinct without being diverse, and this by their own being, by their number and by the fact that the being of the one is not the being of the other, and one wonders whether *God could not produce two pearls so similar, that not only could human beings not discover any difference between them, but that in fact there would not be any, neither in their essence, nor in their accidents.* // This is how Father Lamy attacks this proposition in his so-called geometrical refutation of the system in question [...]. When one speaks of distinction in metaphysics, this must almost always be understood in the sense of the one which is called real, that is to say, the distinction which consists in what the mind perceives in two or more things as bringing about that they can be conceived and exist independently of each other [*celle qui consiste dans ce que l'esprit aperçoit en deux ou plusieurs choses, qui fait que l'une peut être conçue et exister indépendamment de l'autre*]. Thus, an author like ours [i.e. Spinoza], who writes in a short and erudite way, is not obliged to tell his readers that, in propositions such as the one we are dealing with, he does not speak about diversity, but only about distinction in the proper sense.⁴¹

There is much to say about this defense of Spinoza. In this context, however, I will restrict myself to consider how Malebranche reacts to it. Malebranche responds as follows:

I thus say once more that the author is wrong because he takes the idea of the world, the intelligible world or the intelligible extension for the world itself; ideas for the things themselves; and that he thinks that the extension of the world is eternal, necessary etc., because that is how the intelligible extension is: based on this principle that you refer to, and which has been badly understood < by the author > [Spinoza], that one can affirm about some thing that which one conceives to be enclosed in its idea. This principle is true because God can

only have created the beings on the basis of the ideas that he has of them and that the ideas of God are the same as ours when they are necessary. For there would be nothing certain if the ideas we have were different from God's.⁴²

There are two things to note about this reply.

Firstly, Malebranche appears to think that Spinoza has *misunderstood* the principle which governs real distinction. Hence, he does not claim that Spinoza has gotten the *definition* of real distinction wrong, but only that he has given it a wrong *interpretation*. Now, according to Dortous de Mairan, Spinoza implicitly appeals to a conception of real distinction according to which it “consists in what the mind perceives in two or more things as explaining that they can be *conceived and exist independently of each other*” (*op. cit.*). Real distinction is here defined as *MCI* and *MOI* conjointly, in accordance with the traditional Cartesian position. This is indeed how Spinoza defines real distinction. According to EIP10S, when two things are really distinct “one *may be conceived* without the aid of the other.”⁴³ This is equivalent to *MCI*. Moreover, in EIP15S, Spinoza affirms that “things which are really distinct from one another, one *can be*, and remain in its condition, without the other.”⁴⁴ This is equivalent to *MOI*. In addition to this, Dortous de Mairan is surely correct when he suggests that when Spinoza, in EIP4 and EIP5D, speaks of “distinct” substances, we must take that to signify “*really* distinct” substances. All this does not, however, give us any indications about the *principle* which governs real distinction for Spinoza, and it is on this point that Malebranche expresses his *disagreement*. The problem is thus *what*, according to Spinoza, allows affirming that such a distinction between substances exists. Now, according to EID3, a substance is conceived through itself and not through another insofar as it’s “concept does not require the concept of another thing.”⁴⁵ Consequently, for Spinoza, two substances are really distinct when “the concept of the one does not involve the concept of the other” and they consequently “have nothing in common with one another.”⁴⁶ What we should note is that Spinoza’s account of real distinction makes no reference to the Cartesian criterion of clarity and distinction. Instead, he provides a purely conceptual criterion of real distinction which is not so different from Leibniz’s strong notion of mutual cognitive independence, which involves conceptual independence with regard to conditions of conceivability or requisites. However, since Malebranche *contests* Spinoza’s criterion, it could seem that Malebranche dismisses a conceptual criterion principle of real distinction which is quite close to Leibniz’s *MCIp*.

Secondly, against the Spinozistic conceptual and logical criterion of real distinction, Malebranche suggests that the theory of real distinction should be

grounded in the theory of the *vision in God*. The theory of the vision of God is inseparable from Malebranche's notion of divine illumination, i.e. the way in which God enlightens us through clear and distinct ideas. In other words, the criterion of clarity and distinctness makes it implicit reappearance in the affirmations about the identity of our ideas and those of God, since they imply that Malebranche rejects Spinoza's conceptual criterion and replaces it with a criterion which refers to a form of divine illumination. According to Malebranche, we recognize a real distinction when we see it in God, i.e. when a clear and distinct perception of it is given to us by God, or we perceive this distinction "in God." Therefore, if the correspondence with Dortous de Mairan is of any value for understanding what Malebranche thought about real distinction some forty years earlier, we can reasonably assume that, in his early correspondence with Leibniz, Malebranche did indeed adhere to the Cartesian idea that real distinction hinges on clear and distinct perception, even though he disagrees with Descartes what the *source* of clarity and distinction is. In other words, Malebranche adhered to the idea that *MCIC&d* is the criterion for *RD*, and that *MCIC&d* suffices for declaring two things both conceptually and ontologically independent.

Now, as already explained above, Leibniz is arguing to the contrary, that if we define real distinction in the Cartesian sense to which Malebranche adheres, i.e. with reference to clarity and distinctness, then it does not amount to *perfect* mutual cognitive independence, and therefore we cannot conclude from the fact that things are really distinct to the fact that they are separable. What has now become clearer is that Leibniz's objections to Malebranche are in fact a critique of the Cartesian conception of real distinction as given by clarity and distinctness. That Leibniz should come up with such a critique should come as no surprise to anyone familiar with Leibniz's mature writings. In his later comments on Cartesian philosophy, Leibniz consistently and repeatedly maintains that clarity and distinctness is an insufficient criterion for perfect understanding, but that a logical account of perfect understanding taking its point of departure in the fundamental principles of logic is required. For example, in the *Meditationes de cognitione, veritate et ideis*, published in the *Acta eruditorum* in November 1684, Leibniz writes:

Nor is it less deceptive, I think, when men today advance the famous principle that whatever I perceive clearly and distinctly in some thing is true, or may be predicated of it. For what seems clear and distinct to men when they judge rashly is frequently obscure and confused. This axiom is useless unless the criteria of clarity and distinctness which we have proposed are applied and

unless the truth of the ideas is established. For the rest, the rules of common logic, of which the geometricians make use, are not to be despised as criteria of the truth of judgments [...].⁴⁷

This very general critique of Descartes' truth-criterion of clarity and distinctness must also apply to the particular use of that criterion that Descartes makes in his conception of real distinction and mutual cognitive independence. Moreover, the critique does not only apply to the Cartesian conception of truth, grounded in the self-certainty of the *cogito*, but also to the Malebranchian conception of truth, grounded in the vision in God, since it does not really concern the *source* of truth, but the very *nature* of it, i.e. clarity and distinctness as such. Whether we end up grounding truth in a clarity and distinctness generated by the subject itself, or in a clarity and distinctness generated by God, the problem remains the same, since the criterion of truth remains the same, namely clarity and distinctness. In other words, in light of Leibniz's later, general critique of the Cartesian (and Malebranchian) theory of truth, we would indeed *expect* Leibniz to propose a more conceptual and logical account of *mutual cognitive independence* than Malebranche's in the 1676 correspondence. We would not necessarily expect, however, that he would propose a corresponding revision of the notion of *real distinction* in the correspondence as well since Leibniz—on account of his “rhetoric of attraction”—still wants to present his argument without redefining the basic terms employed by his interlocutor, i.e. Malebranche. I believe that *MCIp* amounts to exactly such a logical account of mutual cognitive independence no longer grounded in the criterion of clarity and distinctness.

If this is indeed how we should read the correspondence with Malebranche—and I believe that it is—the question is whether in the ATOP (where Leibniz is writing for himself), Leibniz does what he refrained from doing in the correspondence (where he is constrained by the terminology of his interlocutor), namely, suggesting that real distinction *is* in fact based on *MCIp* and *not* on *MCId*. There are indications that this is the case. In his 2001 contribution to the *Leibniz Kongress*, Kulstad points out that Leibniz notes *radicaliter* above the word *substantias* in the phrase “distinguished, not as substances, but as modes” that we find at the beginning of the ATOP. In the following sentence, Leibniz also speaks of “radical” distinction, before returning to using the notion of “real” distinction in the latter part of the passage. According to Kulstad, this could suggest that Leibniz is straying from the Cartesian use of the term “real distinction,” but he does not find sufficiently conclusive evidence for this interpretative option.⁴⁸ In light of the Malebranche

correspondence and Leibniz's later critique of the Cartesian truth-criterion, however, I believe there is good reason to give more credence to this suggestion. In my view, the fact that Leibniz tentatively suggests using the notion of "radical" distinction instead of "real" distinction to designate the form of distinction which results from *MCIp* does indeed suggest that Leibniz is engaged in a revision of *RD* in relation to the more traditional Cartesian notion.

With this in mind, we can return to the problematic last part of the ATOP where, as we recall, Leibniz states that:

If only those things are really different [*RD*] which can be separated [*SEP*], or [*seu*], of which one can be perfectly understood without the other [*MCIp*], it follows that no thing really differs from another, but that all things are one [...].

Leibniz could be accused here of conflating *SEP* and *MCIp* because of his use of the conjunction "*seu*." I am not sure however, that this is the case. The term *seu* here merely indicates that *SEP* and *MCIp* entail one another, i.e. that all ontologically separable things are perfectly mutually cognitively independent with respect to their conceptual conditions of conceivability, and *vice versa*. This is compatible with what Leibniz also holds in the correspondence with Malebranche, where the entailment relation $MCIp \rightarrow MOI = SEP$ remains valid regardless of Leibniz's doubts concerning the status of *RD*. Nonetheless, whether we think Leibniz conflates *MCIp* and *SEP* or not does not change the fact that the passage now must be read in an entirely different manner than on the non-commitment reading. Recall that the non-commitment reading discarded the argument contained in the ATOP as authentically Leibnizian on the grounds that, in the correspondence with Malebranche, Leibniz *denies* that only separable things are really distinct. This account however, left us in the dark as to what real distinction *is*. Now, however, in light of this second more developed interpretation, Leibniz can be read as saying the following: *if* we define *RD* by means of $SEP = MOI$, and *thus* also by *MCIp* upon which *SEP* and *MOI* hinge, and not by means of some other conception of mutual cognitive independence such as *MCIc&d*, *then* we must conclude that no things are really distinct.

The entire argument then runs as follows. First we return to Malebranche's original position, as presented by Leibniz in his first letter:

$$RD = MCI \rightarrow MOI = SEP$$

Recall that in the correspondence, Leibniz *denies* that this holds, arguing that $RD \neq MCI$. Commitment to the ATOP however, seems to imply *endorsing* it. As

explained above, this could lead to conclude that he *cannot* be committed to the ATOP. However, we should take it seriously when, in the beginning of the ATOP, Leibniz defines real (or radical) distinction as follows: “of those things which are radically different, one can be *perfectly* understood without another.” Since Leibniz is explicitly speaking here of *perfect MCI*, he is in fact saying that $RD = MCIp$. This statement should, I believe, be seen as a *redefinition* of real distinction, that is, as a new logical definition of real distinction different from the usual Cartesian one. In other words, I suggest that Leibniz *revises* the notion of real distinction in the ATOP. This is plausible. As we have seen, the idea that RD should receive a more logical definition in the ATOP corresponds perfectly to one of Leibniz’s main projects in relation to Cartesianism, namely to provide a more formalized theory of truth than the Cartesian one, whose fundamental criterion—clarity and distinctness—is too subjective and relativistic for Leibniz’s taste. Moreover, Leibniz’s tentative use of the notion of “radical” distinction in the ATOP suggests that such a “logical” revision of RD does indeed take place between the two texts. Hence, we should read Leibniz’s respective positions in the Malebranche correspondence and the ATOP to be the following:

Malebranche corr.: *If $RD = MCIc&d$, then $RD \rightarrow SEP$ does not follow.*

ATOP: *If $RD = MCIp$, then $RD \rightarrow SEP$ does follow.*

These two positions are compatible. Consequently, nothing in the Malebranche correspondence suggests that we should have doubts concerning Leibniz’s commitment to the position he develops in the ATOP.

4. Conclusion

I have argued that, in light of the correspondence with Malebranche, we can read the ATOP in two ways: *either* Leibniz develops a thesis in the ATOP to which he is not committed to. He may be seen as not being committed to it because it is grounded in the thesis that real distinction entails separability, which he denies is the case in the correspondence with Malebranche. *Or* he develops a thesis to which he is indeed committed to but, contrary to the correspondence with Malebranche, he introduces a revised non-Cartesian conception of real distinction. I have also argued that we should opt for the second option for three reasons:

- 1) It is the only reading which allows for an account of what real distinction *is* for Leibniz, and thus allows for a complete understanding of what the objections in the correspondence with Malebranche and the argument

contained in the ATOP amount to.

- 2) Leibniz's appeal to the original notion of *radical* distinction as another terminological option in the ATOP suggests that he is engaged in a revision of the more traditional Cartesian notion of *real* distinction.
- 3) It is a reading that fits very well with Leibniz's later general critique of the Cartesian conception of truth as determined by clarity and distinctness.

These reasons are suggestive and not conclusive. Moreover, the first interpretative option is not unattractive or uninteresting, since it would allow us to read the ATOP as a very early version of Leibniz's later "Spinozistic" critique of occasionalism. Nonetheless, I believe there is good reason to maintain that he was on some level committed to—or at least did not formulate any compelling philosophical reasons to reject—the argument developed in the ATOP, especially given the wealth of other texts in the *De summa rerum* that suggest that Leibniz was seriously considering Spinoza-like monism as a possibility.⁴⁹

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Notes

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² Leibniz, *Quod ens perfectissimum sit possibile*, November (?) 1676, A VI, iii.

573, trans. Parkinson, 93-95.

³ Cf. M. Kulstad, “Did Leibniz Incline towards Monistic Pantheism in 1676?,” in *VI. Internationaler Leibniz-Kongress. Leibniz und Europa*, Hannover 1994, 424-8; R. M. Adams, *Leibniz: Determinist, Idealist, Theist*, New Haven: Yale University Press 1994, 123-24, 129. For other papers by Kulstad on this problem, see: “Leibniz’s *De Summa Rerum*. The Origin of the Variety of Things, in Connection with the Spinoza-Tschirnhaus Correspondence,” in F. Nef. et D. Berlioz (eds.), *L’Actualité de Leibniz : les deux labyrinthes. Studia Leibnitiana Supplementa 34*, Stuttgart: Franz Steiner Verlag 1999, 69-86; “Leibniz, Spinoza and Tschirnhaus : Multiple Worlds, Possible Worlds,” in S. Brown (ed.), *The Young Leibniz and his Philosophy*, Dordrecht: Kluwer 1999, 245-62; “Leibnizian Meditations on Monism, Force, and Substance, in Relation to Descartes, Spinoza and Malebranche,” in *The Leibniz Review* 9 (1999), 17-42; “Leibniz’s Early Argument that All Things Are One in Relation to Descartes’ Notions of Real and Modal Distinction,” in *VII. Internationaler Leibniz-Kongress. Nihil sine Ratione*, Berlin 2001, 663-668; “Leibniz, Spinoza and Tschirnhaus: *Metaphysics à Trois*, 1675-76,” in O. Koistinen et J. Biro (eds.), *Spinoza. Metaphysical Themes*, Oxford: Oxford University Press 2002, 221-40; “Exploring the Middle Ground : Was Leibniz’s Conception of God ever Spinozistic ?,” in *American Catholic Philosophical Quarterly* 76 (2002), 671-90; “What Spinoza, in company with Leibniz and Descartes, can bring to Light about Important Varieties of Substance Monism,” in A. Bächli and K. Petrus (eds.), *Monism*, Frankfurt and London: Ontos Verlag 2003, 63-82; “The One and the Many, Kinds of Distinctness and Universal Harmony : The Possibility of Monism or Pantheism in the Young Leibniz,” in D. Rutherford et J. A. Cover (eds.), *Leibniz. Nature and Freedom*, Oxford: Oxford University Press 2005, 20-43.

⁴ Cf. C. Mercer, *Leibniz’s Metaphysics*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 2001, 453-55.

⁵ Cf. M. Lærke, *Leibniz lecteur de Spinoza. La genèse d’une opposition complexe*, Honoré Champion: Paris 2008, 500-517.

⁶ I follow here the dating of the Academy editors, although it is somewhat conjectural (cf. A II, 1 [2], 398-99). André Robinet dates the correspondence earlier, in mid-1675, but his reasons for this are no less conjectural than those put forward by the editors of the Academy (cf. A. Robinet (ed.), *Leibniz et Malebranche. Relations personnelles*, Vrin: Paris 1955). I do not think that a dating in 1675 would make any real difference for the argument I develop, although a dating in 1676 does make the connections to the ATOP, also written in 1676, all the more obvious.

⁷ I became aware of this correspondence during the conference on Leibniz and occasionalism organized by Paul Rateau and Marion Saliceti in Neuchâtel in October 2008. I thank them for inviting me, and apologize for my absent-mindedness after having come across these troubling texts.

⁸ Cf. M. Kulstad, “Leibniz’s Early Argument,” 663-668; “The One and the Many,” 20-43.

⁹ A II, 1 [2], 399, my translation.

¹⁰ A II, 1 [2], 399, my translation.

¹¹ A II, 1 [2], 399, my translation.

¹² A II, 1 [2], 400-401: “Vostre preuve ce me semble, se reduisoit à cecy:

1) deux choses reellement distinctes peuvent estre entendues *parfaitement*, l’une sans l’autre. J’adjoute ce mot, *parfaitement*, parce que je le croy conforme à vostre sentiment.

2) Deux choses intelligibles parfaitement l’une sans l’autre peuvent estre l’une sans l’autre, ou sont separables.

3) Donc deux choses reellement distinctes sont separables.

J’ay bien medité là-dessus, et voicy de quelle manière je demeure d’accord de la 2de proposition de ce *prosyllogisme* : Si *entendre parfaitement* une chose, est entendre tous les requisits suffisans à la constituer, alors j’avoue cette proposition: sçavoir: Quand tous les requisits suffisans à constituer une chose peuvent estre entendus, sans qu’on entende tous les requisits, suffisans à constituer l’autre ; l’une peut estre sans l’autre. Mais ainsi je n’accorde pas la 1re proposition de ce *prosyllogisme*, sçavoir que deux choses estant reellement distinctes tous les requisits de l’une peuvent estre toujours entendus, sans entendre tous les requisits de l’autre.”

¹³ C. Mercer, *Leibniz’s Metaphysics*, chap. I. See also Mercer’s excellent article “Leibniz and his Master. The Correspondence with Thomasius,” in P. Lodge (ed.), *Leibniz and his Correspondents*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2004, 41-42.

¹⁴ Cf. Kulstad, “The One and the Many,” 29.

¹⁵ AT VII, 162, trans. CSM II, 114.

¹⁶ Cf. AT VIII A, 28, trans. CSM II, 213.

¹⁷ Cf. AT VIII A, 29, trans. CSM II, 213.

¹⁸ The explicit occurrence of the term “separate,” absent from the *Second Replies*, makes the *Principles of Philosophy* an even more probable source. Another possible source is the following passage from *Meditation VI*: “[...] the fact that

I can clearly and distinctly understand one thing apart from another is enough to make me certain that the two things are distinct, since they are capable of being separated, at least by God" (AT VII, 78, trans. CSM II, 54). It does seem to me however, that Descartes is very unclear about the exact relation between RD and SEP in this last passage.

¹⁹ Cf. F. Piro, "Hobbes, Pallavicino and Leibniz's "first" principle of sufficient reason," in H. Poser (ed.), *Nihil sine ratione. VII. Internationaler Leibniz-Kongress*, Berlin: Akademie der Wissenschaften 2001, vol. III, 1006-13.

²⁰ A VI, ii, 483, I have consulted but also modified the translation given in Piro, "Hobbes, Pallavicino and Leibniz's "first" principle," 1006.

²¹ A VI, iii, 118, trans. Sleight, 33.

²² Cf. Leibniz, *On Spinoza's Ethics; and on the Infinite*, February 1676 (?), A VI, iii, 385, trans. Arthur, 43; *De formis seu attributis Dei*, April (?) 1676, A VI, iii, 514, trans. Parkinson, 69; *Quod ens perfectissimum sit possibile*, November (?) 1676, A VI, iii, 573, trans. Parkinson 95; *De existentia*, December 1676, A VI, iii, 587, trans. Parkinson, 113.

²³ A VI, iii, 573, trans. Parkinson, 95.

²⁴ In a comment on this paper, Michael Della Rocca has noted that Leibniz might here simply be wrong about the criterion of separability. The common reference to God as the *ultima ratio rerum* of all things does not exclude separability between any two things, since God could simply choose to create and sustain the being of the one while not creating and sustaining the being of the other. I have not found any explicit answer to such an objection in the ATOP or related texts, but I think Leibniz has the conceptual resources to come up with at least two possible answers.

The first and most economical answer would be the following: If God chooses to create the being of one conceivable thing *x* without creating the being of another conceivable thing *y*, *x* is indeed separable from *y*. However, in that case, nothing prevents us from thinking that what makes *x* and *y* separable is nothing but the *being* of *x* and the *non-being* of *y*. So, when God chooses to create *x* and not *y*, they might be separable *in virtue of that very fact*, since what *is not* is necessarily separable from what *is*. This does not prove, however, in case we posit two *existing* things *x* and *y*, that they are separable in the sense that the *being* of the one is ontologically independent of the *being* of the other. But this is what Leibniz is looking for here, I believe. That is, he is looking for a criterion of separability between *beings*, and not a criterion of separability between beings and non-beings. If however, we also posit independence with regard to the *conditions of possibility* as a criterion of

separability, it is *impossible* to conceive of the being of x and the non-being of y simply in terms of Gods choosing one and not the other. For that would involve the appeal *contra hypothesis* to a common condition of conceivability, namely one and the *same* God, to account for the being of the one and the non-being of the other. By positing the stronger criterion of separability, we thus *exclude* the unwanted option according to which we are dealing with separability between a being and a non-being, and not separability between two beings. Therefore, in order to know for certain that two *beings* are separable, we must posit their independence, not only with regard to their conception, but also with regard to their conditions of conceivability.

The second possible answer has the virtue of sounding more “Leibnizian,” but requires more premises. Leibniz could point to the connectedness of all things, i.e. the fact that all things in the existing world are elements in a same world W where everything “conspires” or, to take up a notion from the *Confessio philosophi* and the *Conversatio cum Stenonio*, where everything is connected to everything else in relations of external requisition (for references, see note 29 below). In a world W(x, y, z, q), the being of x is inseparable from the being of y, z and q, the being of y inseparable from the being of x, z and q, the being of z inseparable from the being of x, y and q, and, finally, the being of q inseparable from x, y and z. God cannot create one thing x in the world W without also creating all the other things y, z, q, which are also things in W. The existence of y, z and q thus form the total aggregate of external requisites or conditions of existence of x, the totality of terms being ultimately conditioned by the existence of God, the *ultima ratio rerum*. The *Confessio philosophi*, for example, contains an argument going in that direction (without having all the elements of it): “[...] everything which is not the reason why it itself exists [...] must be reduced to a reason, and then to the reason of the reason, and so on, until it is reduced to what is its own reason, that is, the self-sufficient being, i.e., God” (A VI, iii, 120; Sleight, 39). This argument, however, is not the one Leibniz makes in the ATOP, where he simply states that “since the ultimate reason of things is unique, and contains by itself the aggregate of all requisites of all things, it is evident that the requisites of all things are the same” (*op.cit.*). There is no reference to relations of external requisition among things belonging to the same world, but only to the relation of “ultimate” requisition between God and all things. Following this line of argumentation it could thus seem that, in the ATOP, Leibniz is somehow conflating the issue of *external requisition* (i.e. the fact that the existence of one thing is conditioned by the existence of other things which

forms its reason) and that of the *ultimate reason* (i.e. the fact that the existence of anything at all is conditioned by the existence of the reason of all reasons, i.e., of God). For that reason, I incline towards the first interpretative option. It should be stressed however that, to my knowledge, nothing in the texts we are concerned with here warrants one or the other of these answers.

²⁵ A II, 1 [2], 403.

²⁶ A II,1 [2], 404: “C’est très bien distingué. Mais il vous reste à prouver que deux estres, tels que sont les parties de l’espace, n’ont point de requisits. Chez moy tout ce qui peut ester produit, a des *requisits* hors de luy, sçavoir ceux qui ont concours à sa production. Or les parties de l’espace sont produites par le mouvement du corps qui le coupe. Donc elles ont des requisits. Vous entreprenez pourtant de prouver le contraire, et cela ainsi:

Les parties de l’etendue ne sont pas des manieres d’estre, ou estres respectifs, mais des estres absolus.

Les estres absolus ont une idée simple.

Les choses dont l’idée est simple n’ont point de requisits.

Donc les parties de l’espace n’ont point de requisits.

De la maniere que Vous expliquez par ce raisonnement même, ce que vous appelez *Estres absolus*, je suis obligé de ne pas accorder, que les parties susdites sont des estres absolus: il n’y aura meme que Dieu, et ses perfections ou attributes, qui seront absolus en ce sens là.”

²⁷ This in itself is already quite interesting, since it announces the famous argument for the existence of God that Leibniz develops about a year later in the *Quod ens perfectissimum existit* and in the *Quod ens perfectissimum sit possibile* which can be summarized as follows: God’s existence follows from the possibility of His concept; the possibility of his concept follows from the compatibility of his perfections; the compatibility of his perfections follows from the impossibility of proving their incompatibility; finally, the impossibility of proving their incompatibility follows from the simplicity of the perfections. This is so because the simplicity of the perfections implies that they have no conditions of conceivability, but are conceived through themselves (cf. A VI, iii , 572-79, trans. Parkinson, 91-103).

²⁸ That God does not have any *external* requisites, i.e. external conditions of conceivability, does not mean that God is a being without requisites at all. As Leibniz constantly claims in his discussions of the ontological proof of God, God has *internal* requisites or conditions of conceivability, insofar as his existence requires that he is *possible*, i.e. that the concept of God involves no contradiction. The

distinction between external and internal requisites can be found in the *Confessio philosophi*, 1672-73, A VI, iii, 133, trans. Sleigh, 69, and in the *Conversatio cum Domino Episcopo Stenonio de libertate*, 27 November 1677, A VI, iv, 1380, trans. Sleigh, 123. For texts which present possibility as a type of requirement, see for example *Generales inquisitiones*, § 61, A VI, iv, 758; GP VII, 294-95. On this, see also *Leibniz lecteur de Spinoza*, 374-79.

²⁹ Later, in his comments on Spinoza's *Ethics* from February 1678 (cf. A VI, iv, 1769, trans. Loemker, 199) and in the *De rerum originatione radicali* from 1697 (cf. GP VII, 302-3, trans. Loemker, 486-87), Leibniz provides a more elaborate version of the cosmological proof, where he insists very strongly on distinguishing between causal and conceptual relations, arguing that a valid version of the proof must be based on the latter type of relations. In my view, however, it is unlikely that Leibniz had developed any meaningful distinction between conceptual and causal relations as early as 1676. On this, see *Leibniz lecteur de Spinoza*, 384-94, 733-36.

³⁰ Spinoza, Letter 12, G IV, 61-62, trans. Curley, 205.

³¹ A VI, iii, 283, trans. Arthur, 117.

³² For a detailed discussion of this passage, see my "Leibniz's Cosmological Argument," [under review].

³³ Cf. GPIV, 508, 515. In these later texts, Leibniz's assimilation of Spinozism and occasionalism is mainly based on his critique of the theory of occasional causes which, in his view, tends to reduce all things to mere modes of God. See also *Essais de théodicée*, § 393, GP VI, 350-51; GP IV, 590; GP VI, 530; GP VII, 444; GM VII, 239, and Leibniz to Lelong, 5 February 1712, in Robinet (ed.), *Malebranche et Leibniz*, 421. For a developed discussion of the meaning and justification of the mature Leibniz's assimilation of occasionalism and Spinozism, see M. Lærke, "Le nouveau cartésianisme et le dernier novateur : Leibniz sur les rapports entre occasionnalisme et spinozisme," in D. Kolesnik-Antoine (ed.), *Qu'est-ce qu'être cartésien?*, Lyon: ENS Editions, [forthcoming].

³⁴ Descartes, *Principles of philosophy* I, § 60, AT VIII A, 28, trans. CSM II, 213; my italics.

³⁵ M. Gueroult, *Malebranche*, Paris: Aubier 1992, II, 10.

³⁶ Cf. Descartes, *Metaphysical meditations*, III, AT VII, 35, trans. CSM II, 24.

³⁷ N. Malebranche, *The Search for Truth*, Bk. III, Part 2, chap. 6, trans. T. M. Lennon, Cambridge : Cambridge University Press, 1997, 230.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, Elucidation X, 622-23.

³⁹ Gueroult, *Malebranche*, I, 52: "Notre intelligence, c'est à coup sûr la clarté de

notre esprit, la lumière en nous. Mais cette clarté, cette lumière en nous ne vient pas de nous. Notre âme n'est donc pas par elle-même intelligence: elle le devient sous l'action de cette clarté qu'elle reçoit."

⁴⁰ Except for noting the intriguing fact that the only times where Malebranche addresses the question of real distinction in any developed manner, it is somehow in the context of Spinozism.

⁴¹ Dortous De Mairan to Malebranche, 6 Mai 1714, in Malebranche, *Oeuvres complètes*, XIX, Vrin: Paris 1961, 873-74 (my translation): "L'auteur [i.e. Spinoza] y prouve d'une manière concise et métaphysique, que deux ou plusieurs choses distinctes ne sauroient être distinguées entre elles que par la diversité de leurs attributs ou par celle de leurs modifications; et il se fonde sur ce que tout ce qui est, est en soi ou en autre chose, substance ou mode. Là-dessus on objecte qu'il confond la diversité avec la distinction; que les substances de meme attribut ou de meme essence peuvent être distinctes sans être diverses, et cela par leur propre être, par leur nombre et en ce que l'être de l'une n'est pas l'être de l'autre, et on demande si Dieu ne pourroit pas produire deux perles si semblables, que non seulement les hommes ne pourroient découvrir nulle difference, mais meme qu'il n'y en aura aucune, ni dans leur essence, ni dans leurs accidents. // C'est ainsi que le P. Lamy attaque cette proposition dans sa refutation prétendue géométrique du système dont il s'agit [...] Quand on parle de distinction en métaphysique, cela se doit presque toujours entendre de celle qu'on appelle réelle, c'est-à-dire de celle qui consiste dans ce que l'esprit aperçoit en deux ou plusieurs choses, qui fait que l'une peut être conçue et exister indépendamment de l'autre. Ainsi, un auteur tel que le nôtre, qui écrit d'une manière courte et savante, n'est pas obligé d'avertir ses lecteurs, dans des propositions semblables à celle dont il s'agit, qu'il ne parle pas de la diversité, mais seulement de la distinction proprement dite."

⁴² Malebranche to Dortous de Mairan, 12 June 1714, in *Oeuvres complètes*, IXI, 883 (my translation): "Je dis donc encore que l'auteur se trompe, parce qu'il prend l'idée du monde, le monde intelligible ou l'étendue intelligible, pour le monde; les idées pour les choses memes: et qu'il croit que l'étendue du monde est éternelle, nécessaire etc., parce que telle est l'étendue intelligible: fondé sur ce principe que vous rapportez, mal entendu < par l'auteur > qu'on peut assurer d'une chose ce que l'on conçoit être renfermé dans son idée. Ce principe est vrai parce que Dieu ne peut avoir créé les estres que sur les idées qu'il en a et que les idées que Dieu a sont les memes que les nôtres, quand elles sont nécessaires. Car il n'y auroit rien de certain si les idées que nous avons étoient différentes de celles de Dieu."

⁴³ EIP10S, G II, 52, trans. Curley, 416; my italics.

⁴⁴ EIP15S, G II, 59, trans. Curley, 423; my italics.

⁴⁵ EID3, G II, 45, trans. Curley, 408.

⁴⁶ EIP2, G II, 46, trans. Curley, 410-11.

⁴⁷ Leibniz, *Meditationes de cognitione, veritate, et ideis*, November 1684, A VI, iv, 590, trans. Loemker, 293-94 (translation modified). See also the *Animadversiones in partem generalem Principiorum Cartesianorum*, 1692, GP IV, 363, Loemker, 389: “I have elsewhere called attention to the fact that there is not much use in the celebrated rule that *only what is clear and distinct shall be approved*, unless better marks of clearness and distinctness are offered than those of Descartes. Preferable are the rules of Aristotle and the geometricians, namely, that with the exception of principles, that is, of first truths or hypotheses, we are to admit nothing unless proved by a valid argument.”

⁴⁸ Cf. Kulstad, “Leibniz’s Early Argument,” 664; “The one and the Many”, 28-29.

⁴⁹ I will not provide a list of those texts here. I will simply note that even the fiercest opponent of such readings, namely Christia Mercer, grants that “the striking thing about these interpretations is that each is based on an impressive amount of textual evidence” (Mercer, *Leibniz’s Metaphysics*, 451).