

Reply to Donald Rutherford

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Donald Rutherford's penetrating remarks on my *The Science of the Individual* (hereafter 'SI') raise a host of stimulating questions which deserve a lengthy discussion. Here I can only try to react sketchily to some of his suggestions.

I

At the beginning of his review, Rutherford correctly points out that "one of the book's central theses [is] that Leibniz's theorizing about individual substance should be seen as proceeding on two parallel tracks, one logical or conceptual, the other ontological." (125). My aim, indeed, was to explore the view about ontological subject and predication underlying Leibniz's well-known allegedly 'logical' foundation of the complete concept. We could put the matter, a bit roughly, in this way: in the standard view – stemming at least from Russell's seminal monograph – the *Discourse* substance theory is grounded on a flagrant blurring of logical and ontological subject; at the same time, as a matter of fact, the complete concept view (together with the related thesis of IdInd and the containment theory of truth) would be the natural counterpart of a radical descriptivist and bundle theoretical view – or at least, in the terms coined by R. M. Adams, of an individuation based on 'suchnesses'.

According to my reconstruction, on the contrary, Leibniz is well aware of the need to distinguish between individual and concept, subject and properties; moreover, this plays an important role in his unprejudiced rediscovery of the ontological framework of substance. Thus, as I show in SI, Part I, he lays emphasis on the irreducibility of the (ontological) subject to the bundle of properties in his reflections of the Paris Notes ("*mira res aliud esse subjectum quam formas seu attributa*"¹) – at the cross-road of the double heritage of nominalistically-minded particularism and combinatorial metaphysics. This 'ontological asymmetry' is further worked out by him in the first Hanover years, in drafts like the *De Cogitationum Analysis* (putative dating 1679²). All this, taken together with his rejection of old and new essentialism – I mean, both of universal 'second' substances ('man') and of the abstract notions of the 'moderns' (Extension and Thought) – leads us to an unexpectedly heccetistic image of Leibniz's ontology. Nevertheless, he finally undisputably arrives at a view

of conceptual individuation. How do we explain this? To give an answer, we have to focus more on the background of his 1686 synthesis.

II

In part II of my book, in particular, I have tried to show – on the basis of the rich textual material provided by AVI.4 – how Leibniz’s inquiry into the linguistic-categorical framework provides an important, and so far relatively overlooked (with the exception of some pioneering remarks of scholars like H. Schepers and D. Rutherford himself) background for the articulation of his mid-eighties substance theory. When introducing the ‘complete concept’ in DM 8 on the basis of his theory of truth, Leibniz is tacitly assuming, besides this theory, also some ontological idea of a concrete particular subject; and the linguistic-categorical analysis of the drafts from the eighties can shed much light on the working out of this idea.

Here, however, we meet the first critical remark of Rutherford’s I want dwell a bit on: “Di Bella maintains that Leibniz’s use of the terms *res* or *subjectum* should not be taken as committing him to a view of substance as bare substratum. This is undoubtedly correct as a point about ontology; however, it does not apply to the role played by this notion in Leibniz’s theories of language and cognition.” (129)

As a general methodological point, I fully subscribe to the claim that the semantic interest of the drafts on *characteristica verbalis* should be distinguished from the ontological interest of the substance theory; I would draw the divide in a slightly different manner, however. In Leibniz’s ‘category tables’, at least, semantic and ontological analysis go to a large extent hand in hand; a different step is actually taken when the analysis shifts from the more general ontological notion of *thing* to the metaphysically more committed one of *substance* – especially of *individual* substance. In any case, *also as a point about ontology*, the thesis that ‘the subject is *not* a bare substratum’ is in my reconstruction – given the emphasis on the subject/properties distinction – more a final conclusion, than a postulate or something which goes without saying.

But let us stay firstly at the level of the thing/properties structure, such as it is expressed in the important semantic analysis of every term into *ens* + an attributive term, to which Rutherford refers. I for my part have tracked the origins of this analysis back to Leibniz’s reflections – largely influenced by nominalistic or particularist assumptions – on sources like Hobbes’s *De corpore* and Raue’s analysis of predication. Not surprisingly, the analysis surely borders on the idea of subject as a bare

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substratum. Important in this respect is the fact that all concrete terms – substantive and adjectival – are handled completely on a par, leaving no semantic basis for the substantial/accidental distinction. This attitude is still pursued in the later texts of *characteristica verbalis*, where the substantive/adjective distinction is usually taken as philosophically irrelevant (but see on this the passages in *Characteristica verbalis*, *Notationes generales* and other drafts, discussed in SI 185-191). What is important and constant is Leibniz’s willingness to distinguish the ontological dimension of, say, ‘subjecthood’ or ‘thinghood’ from the bundle of properties or from the concepts. In this sense I fully agree with Rutherford; moreover, as I have hinted above, this is not in contrast, but coherent with the ontological intuitions which I have emphasized in Leibniz’s earlier metaphysical reflections.

In the texts of the eighties and later years, however, the relevant dichotomy is no longer, in my opinion, that of bare subject vs. properties (or, in the language of combinatorial metaphysics, ‘forms’), but is shifts to the one-many polarity between the thing (*res*) and the many concepts (*termini*) through which we refer to it. This thing/concepts opposition is a *leitmotiv* also in much later drafts, always in the spirit of a criticism of abstract beings, both in Scholastic and modern ontologies. Here the ‘thing’, however, is already taken as a particular and determinate item. Moreover, Leibniz is looking for some terms (concepts) which – differing from the abstract ones – are capable of capturing and expressing the thing/subject as such. Thus, several drafts show a progression from abstract to concrete terms, and further on to complete ones, ready to work as terms for true substances. Rutherford himself makes this point in a perfectly clear manner (“Leibniz’s implicit question ... is: is it possible to define a concrete term in such a way that it would represent some subject as individual substance?” 130), so that from now on, the discussion on this decisive step seems to be one of emphasis, or of philosophical evaluation, more than one of interpretative disagreement.

III

True, as I myself point out, the last step to the individual term and its predicative completeness – in a word, to the complete concept – requires some other assumptions, going beyond linguistic analysis. We come here to the more general objection raised by Rutherford. According to him, “the pre-theoretical idea of individual substance as a complete being and the definition of a complete concept” would not be distinguished as sharply as it is worth doing (131-132). This charge could

be slightly surprising – given also that Rutherford himself acknowledged this distinction as one of my main points. I suspect, indeed, that our concerns about that distinction are actually not so far apart. Thus, I am perfectly aware – and I have pointed this out in many ways – that the strong metaphysical corollaries Leibniz is willing to draw from the complete concept theory do not logically follow from it; on the contrary, they are chiefly presupposed by it, being often developed autonomously in earlier years.

As a matter of fact, however, the final step in the working out of the idea of complete being is not wholly independent of the construction of the complete concept. To be sure, I have said that the former (as the notion of a concrete particular) has to be presupposed by the application of the theory of truth – hence by the construction of the latter. The link, however, also works the other way around. The idea of conceptual containment, in fact, leads Leibniz beyond the model of subject/substratum, towards a subject capable of working as an *explanatory* principle. This is already evident in the *De Cogitationum Analysisi*, and is finally established in the 1686 writings relying on the conceptual containment theory of truth. Of course, conceptual containment, in order to satisfy the explanatory requirement and to be not trivial, should be thought of, in its turn, according to other non logical (but rather metaphysical, or epistemological or nomological) ideas.

In this way, complete concept and complete being are finally closely linked – not by myself, but by Leibniz. Of course, this can be read as a stimulating (though, admittedly, vague enough) intuition or simply as a sheer blurring. I tried to draw out a bit more (or too?) sympathetically the philosophical intuition that Leibniz was eager to capture and express by this attempt at a ‘new alliance of concept and thing’. In one sense, this intuition amounts to the rejection of the ‘bare substratum’ as a model for substance – *though maintaining, notice, the dimension of ‘subjecthood’*. By this move, Leibniz locates himself beyond the dialectic bare substratum/bundle of properties (and, I would say, the one between thisness and suchness). Though remaining a ‘this’ (a *tode*, in the language of the old Aristotelian substance theory), the ontological subject is also a ‘this-such’ (a *tode ti*); in this way, a properly essentialist element emerges. Only, it is no longer placed at the general or specific level where old and new varieties of essentialism located it, but directly at the level of the individual. There is a constitutive individual property of the ontological subject, lying at a different position than other properties, and involving all of them - be it grasped as primitive law, or expressed in the metaphorical language of the point of view.

Before going further, a remark is in order: these ontological issues concerning the individual/concept relationship are preliminary also to the vexed question of so-called ‘super-essentialism’. Both a bundle-theoretical or a bare substratum approach, in fact, would be at pains to justify *de re* modal attributions. In both cases, Leibniz’s denial of TWI, on closer inspection, would turn out to be the consequence of a radical difficulty in justifying essentialist intuitions, more than of some sharpening of them (by the way: I think that emphasizing, of course in a different way, this aspect is one of the most stimulating, and relatively overlooked, contributions of Cover’s and Hawthorne’s recent work on these topics).

Of course, if we are inclined to take every essentialist claim as a sheer confusion of things and our descriptions of them, Leibniz’s notion of individual essence is likely to appear as a bizarre extreme case of that confusion. Consider, however, that Leibniz’s concepts are ideas in God’s mind; on the assumption of divine creation according to a plan, he can well suppose that they are embodied in individual things – i.e., they correspond to an ontological structure governing from within the unfolding of the individual. Thus, the introduction of the individual concept converges with Leibniz’s attempt at rehabilitating the notion of substance as form.

The last remarks on concept and form suggest how the individual essence expressed by the complete concept can work as a principle of change, hence of transtemporal sameness. This idea is absolutely central, in my view, to Leibniz’s substance theory. Also here, Leibniz implants on the complete concept thesis some independent metaphysical intuitions, or some of his discoveries in particular fields (e. g., dynamics, or philosophy of mind); but – at least in the 1686 period – stressing the conceptual foundation amounts for him to stressing that a true continuant cannot be taken as a matter-like substratum, but as a form-like ‘nature’, in the sense of a neo-Aristotelian ‘*physis*’ (here, I use ‘matter’ in a very abstract metaphysical sense).

IV

Alternatively, we can take Leibniz’s statements in the sense of the idea of a substratum-continuant plus a complete concept which is simply a sum of predicates. But then, the theses on inclusion and sameness turn out ultimately to be only innocuous and trivial metaphors – which could hardly make sense of the foundational role for sameness attributed to the concept, for instance in the example of ‘moy’ in Paris

and in Germany in the Arnauld correspondence.

Thus, the problem shifts towards our understanding of the inner structure of the complete concept. We can take it either as a mere list, or as a principle of deduction over and above the series of predicates, and lying at the level of subject itself, in the sense of being constitutive of its identity. Two remarks are in order here: a) I am willing to admit – and I even emphasized this, especially in my reading of the Leibniz-Arnauld correspondence (SI section 7) – that Leibniz is oscillating between these two readings of the complete concept, using one or the other according to his interests or dialectical strategy in different contexts – i.e., weakening or sharpening the ‘compactness’ of the concept; b) I am also ready to recognize that the complete concept at best *represents* – according to Rutherford’s acute remark - the individual’s reality; but in the first reading, it represents it in a somehow trivial and scarcely informative way; in the second, it hints at a significant metaphysically explanatory role – though we are unable to grasp a kindred concept, and to operate with it. We could also say: the standard reading of complete concept, as a kind of list built up from the logical conjunction of general concepts, is the representation by the logical resources of our concept logic of that lawlike ontological structure which we have to postulate in order to ultimately make sense of our whole conceptual and ontological framework, but which only God can dominate.

Of course, this attempt at making sense of the complete concept somehow assumes, according to Rutherford’s objection, the equivalence of this slippery notion to the more respectable one of law-of-the-series. This I am ready to admit; but it seems to me an equivalence well authorized by the texts – and also widely accepted in the literature. As concerns the causal-nomological structure, then, Rutherford rightly points out that it would be worth expanding the research into its temporal aspect: a direction I am also strongly interested in – especially as concerns the aporetic relationship of that basically tenseless structure with the properly temporal unfolding.

Finally: it is also true that – as Rutherford observes – this causal temporal structure can hardly be represented by a commonly conceived conceptual link. Leibniz interestingly confronts this problem – in particular the aspect of change – in his discussion with the Cartesian de Volder.³ (By the way, this is one of the contexts which show that the ontology of complete concept is never abandoned by Leibniz, although in later expositions he privileged other approaches to his substance theory.) But Leibniz’s main concern with his Cartesian interlocutors, like de Volder, was exactly that of convincing them of the need to go beyond their idea of conceptual

entailment. Here also Leibniz's is more a gesture than a manageable theory, and it could simply be dismissed as a misleading one; but it could also point towards both a philosophically interesting problem and a better appreciation of his historical position. Contrary to what is still commonly held, Leibniz does not blur inherence with conceptual inclusion nor, in general, ontological dependence with standard conceptual dependence. Indeed, he is eager to challenge Cartesian ontology for this confusion. Rather, talk of conceptual inclusion in his peculiar sense aims at capturing some idea of intrinsicalness, or nomological link, different both from conceptual necessity and from mere aggregation.

Here, I can only hint at the fact that Leibniz has further pursued an inquiry into a more adequate theory of ontological dependence (both of causal-temporal link and inherence) within his semi-formal ontology of conditions (*requisita*) – which also has other sources and goes beyond the scope of a substance metaphysics; but at the same time is also applied to the latter (see SI section 6). Thus, for instance, his *De abstracto et concreto*⁴ further investigates, some years after the *Discourse* and the *Generales Inquisitiones*, the general framework of the *inesse* relation, embracing (but also better distinguishing) both inherence and conceptual containment.

The study of this and related texts could also help in tackling another open question touched on by Rutherford's review: viz., we could better understand how Leibniz maintains the distinction between the properly ontological elements like individual accidents on one hand, and the corresponding ingredients of *our* concepts on the other, which remain abstract and general. In this sense, I suspect, I am more cautious than Rutherford seems to be in speaking of Leibnizian particularism as far as our cognitive and semantic practice is concerned.

V

Only a few words can be said as concerns the last group of Rutherford's remarks, concerning what I have called conceptual holism. A clarification is in order here; I allow myself to quote from my section 9: "I am far from thinking that the key to Leibniz's thesis about WBI can be found only, or even basically, in the strength of the individual-world connection. I am also far from thinking, however, that relational or nomological considerations could offer a way out of the denial of TWI. On the contrary, it seems to me that Leibniz's intuitions about the individual-world relation cannot but reinforce his adhesion to a strong WBI thesis."⁵ Ontological autonomy – i.e. the causal independence of each individual from his/her world-mates - is the

other side of conceptual holism. One should notice that I have been careful to speak of ‘intra-monadic relations’ – i.e., inner perceptual states, which are undoubtedly essential to individuation (e.g. Adam’s perception not of a woman in general, but of Eve) – by distinguishing them from the further question of their inter-monadic counterparts. In the interpretation which insists on relational predicates to escape WBI, the emphasis laid on the solipsistic hypothesis – which is used by Leibniz, in my opinion, with a different aim, i.e. just to emphasize causal autonomy – relies on the second aspect, but, perhaps, does not take into account enough of the former. Also the talk about supervenience somehow risks concealing the most astonishing trait of Leibniz’s view – what I have called the Thesis of Changing Relata, according to which every change in a relation implies a change in both relata, so that one could read off the whole universe from one substance only. Anyway, I am ready to agree with Rutherford’s remarks on the “worldhood”, and I have tried to express a similar intuition through my example of the jigsaw puzzle.⁶ As in the case of the unfolding of the law-of-the-series, indeed, some *contingent* connection is somehow taken by Leibniz as constitutive of individual identity. Finally, I do not see a contradiction in emphasizing the individuative role of both the “point of view” and the relational properties, because the point of view grounds, in Leibniz’s admittedly largely metaphorical words, a true ‘*concentration de l’univers*’. See for instance Leibniz’s reply to a similar objection of Bayle.⁷

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Notes

¹ A VI.3, 514, SI 55-61.

² A VI.4, 2767-71; SI 88-98.

³ See on this SI 218-226

⁴ A VI.4, 987-996.

⁵ SI 341.

⁶ SI 347-349. See also Des Bosses’s objection and Leibniz’s reply at GP II 493, 496, quoted in SI 349-350.

⁷ GPIV 553-554 (quoted in SI 352).