

Oswaldo Ottaviani

Leibniz on Existence

A Historical and Analytical Study



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Table of contents

| | |
|---|----|
| List of Abbreviations | 9 |
| Preface | 13 |
| Introduction. The Puzzle of Existence. From Russell to Leibniz | 23 |
| 1. Russell on Leibniz on Existence | 23 |
| 1.1. The Synthetic Nature of Existential Statements | 24 |
| 1.2. Russell Between Leibniz and Kant | 26 |
| 2. Conceptual Containment and Existence | 28 |
| 2.1. Couturat vs. Russell on Existence | 28 |
| 2.2. The Superessentialist Account: Russell Vindicated | 29 |
| 2.3. Predicates or Properties? | 30 |
| 2.4. Descriptivism and the Limits of Conceptual Containment | 32 |
| 2.5. Species and Individuals: A Neglected Russellian Remark | 33 |
| 2.6. The Root of Contingency: Existence or Infinity? | 34 |
| 3. The Standard Reading | 36 |
| 3.1. Existence as Exemplification | 36 |
| 3.2. The Problem of Actuality | 38 |
| 4. The Evolution of Leibniz's Views on Existence | 39 |
| 4.1. The Young Leibniz on Existence | 39 |
| 4.2. Phenomenology, Ontology, and Modality | 40 |
| 4.3. The Complete Concept: Individual Essence and/or Ontological Subject? | 43 |
| 5. Making Sense of Existence: Ontology or Modality? | 44 |
| 5.1. The Double Account of the Copula and the Double Account of Possibility | 44 |
| 5.2. A Contemporary Approach: Encoding vs. Exemplification | 45 |
| 6. Essences and Possible Worlds: A Problematic Synthesis | 46 |
| 6.1. Superessentialism and Theodicy | 47 |
| 6.2. The Case of Divine Wisdom | 48 |
| 6.3. The Region of the Possibles: Stratification or Reductionism? | 49 |

PART 1. LEIBNIZ'S EARLY VIEWS ON EXISTENCE

| | |
|--|-----|
| Introduction to Part One | 55 |
| Chapter 1. Existence and Individuation in Leibniz's <i>De Principio Individui</i> (1663) | 59 |
| 1.1. A Controversial Starting Point? The Young Leibniz on Individuation (1663) | 59 |
| 1.2. "Unum supra ens nihil addit reale". Leibniz against the Formal Distinction | 61 |
| 1.3. Essence and Existence. Leibniz against the Real Distinction | 68 |
| 1.4. The Young Leibniz: What Kind of Nominalism? | 77 |
| Chapter 2. Nominalism and Eternal Truths. Jakob Thomasius and the Young Leibniz | 81 |
| 2.1. The Eternity (and Reality) of Essences. An Ambiguous Claim | 81 |
| 2.2. Thomasius on Eternal Truths: A Deflationary Account | 84 |
| 2.3. The Suárezian Synthesis and Its Breakdown | 89 |
| 2.4. Thomasius, Leibniz, and the Rejection of <i>Ens Potentiale</i> | 93 |
| 2.5. Existence (not Essence) as the Ground of Eternal Truths | 97 |
| 2.6. Necessity, Essentialism, and Some Open Questions | 98 |
| Chapter 3. Existence and Hypothetical Truths in the Young Leibniz (1663-1672) | 103 |
| 3.1. Metaphysics as a System of Hypothetical Truths | 103 |
| 3.2. Singular Propositions and Existence in the <i>Dissertatio de Arte Combinatoria</i> | 106 |
| 3.3. Hobbes' Analysis of Predication and Its Ontological Consequences | 110 |
| 3.4. Leibniz and the Hobbesian Framework: The <i>Preface to Nizolius</i> | 115 |
| 3.5. Leibniz's <i>Demonstratio Propositionum Primarum</i> . A Theory of Nominal Definitions | 117 |
| 3.6. A Weak Account of Possibility: Clear and Distinct Conceivability | 122 |
| 3.7. Leibniz's Criticism of Nizolius: An Anticipation of the <i>pays des possibles</i> ? | 126 |
| Chapter 4. The Young Leibniz and the Ontological Argument. From Rejection to Reconsideration | 129 |
| 4.1. Leibniz and the Cartesian Proof. An Overview | 129 |
| 4.2. The Demonstration of the Existence of God in the Young Leibniz | 131 |
| 4.3. The <i>Specimen Demonstrationum</i> (ca. 1671). A Rejection of the Cartesian Proof | 135 |
| 4.4. The Young Leibniz between Descartes and Gassendi | 138 |
| 4.5. The Ontological Argument Reconsidered: <i>Probatio Existentiae Dei ex Ejus Essentia</i> (1678) | 141 |
| 4.6. Two Views on Essence and Existence | 144 |
| Chapter 5. Distinct Perceivability as the Mark of Existence. Leibniz's Phenomenology of Existence (1667/1676) | 147 |
| 5.1. Leibniz's <i>A Posteriori</i> Account of Existence | 147 |
| 5.2. Existence as Perceivability: The Limits of Leibniz's Phenomenalism | 152 |

| | |
|---|-----|
| 5.3. Existence as Perceivability: The Leibnizian <i>Cogito</i> and the “Dream Argument” | 154 |
| 5.4. Between Pragmatism and Phenomenalism: The Problem of the External World | 161 |
| 5.5. Leibniz’s Provisional Phenomenalism | 169 |

PART 2. THE RISE OF POSSIBLE WORLDS

| | |
|--|-----|
| Introduction to Part Two | 173 |
| Chapter 6. <i>Series Rerum</i> . The Actual World and the Genesis of Leibniz’s Theory of Possible Worlds | 177 |
| 6.1. Possibilities Without Possible Worlds in the Paris Notes | 178 |
| 6.2. Possibles as Imaginary Entities | 180 |
| 6.3. Leibniz’s Rejection of the Collective Account of Possibilities | 183 |
| 6.4. The Evolution of Leibniz’s Ideas. An Overview | 189 |
| 6.5. Superessentialism without Complete Concepts: the <i>Confessio Philosophi</i> | 191 |
| 6.6. The Emergence of Alternative Possible Series: Leibniz’s Discussion with Steno (1677) | 194 |
| 6.7. Possible Causes and Possible Individuals | 196 |
| 6.8. The Theodicean Roots of Leibniz’s Superessentialism | 198 |
| Chapter 7. Leibniz on the Plurality of Worlds | 201 |
| 7.1. <i>Non nisi unum est genus Mundi</i> . Leibniz’s Tantalizing Argument | 202 |
| 7.2. From the Worlds of Dreams to the Plurality of Worlds. Leibniz’s Reflections of April 1676 | 206 |
| 7.3. Indexicality and Actuality: An Egalitarian Temptation? | 211 |
| 7.4. Leibniz’s Argument Against the Plurality of Worlds | 216 |
| 7.5. Verificationism or Realism about Truth? | 218 |
| 7.6. <i>Phaenomena Dei</i> and God’s Knowledge of Actuality | 222 |
| 7.7. Leibnizian Actualism | 228 |

PART 3. MODALITY, ONTOLOGY, AND THE PUZZLE OF EXISTENCE

| | |
|---|-----|
| Introduction to Part Three | 233 |
| Chapter 8. <i>Ratio formalis existentiae</i> | 235 |
| 8.1. Harmony, Infinity, and the Gap between the two Accounts of Existence | 235 |
| 8.2. Existence and Infinity: The Case of Existential Propositions | 236 |
| 8.3. <i>Altitudo Divitiarum</i> . The Mystery of Existence | 239 |
| 8.4. A Place for Divine Wisdom | 243 |
| 8.5. Two Views on Existence and Contingency | 247 |

| | |
|--|-----|
| 8.6. A Twofold Account of Eternal Truths | 249 |
| Chapter 9. The Puzzle of Existence and Leibniz's Mature Account of Possibility | 255 |
| 9.1. <i>Constantia subjecti</i> | 255 |
| 9.2. Divine Ideas: Leibniz's Discussion with Gabriel Wagner (1697-98) | 257 |
| 9.3. Divine Ideas: Exemplars or Representations? | 262 |
| 9.4. The Puzzle of Existence Revisited | 265 |
| 9.5. <i>Existurientia</i> : An Existential Notion of Possibility | 271 |
| 9.6. Existence and Extrinsic Denominations | 275 |
| 9.7. Coda. A Bias in Favour of Existence? | 278 |
| Chapter 10. Modality and Ontology | 281 |
| 10.1. <i>Existentia Possibilis</i> . A Problematic Notion | 282 |
| 10.2. Existence: Modal vs. Ontological Sense | 285 |
| 10.3. The Ontological Subject in <i>De Cogitationum Analysis</i> | 287 |
| 10.4. Possible Individuals: An Attributive Reading | 290 |
| 10.5. Possibilities vs. Possible Individuals | 295 |
| 10.6. Contingency, Individuality, and Possible Existence | 302 |
| 10.7. A Final Overview | 307 |
| Conclusion. Leibniz's Metaphysics of Existence: An Outline | 311 |
| Bibliography | 317 |
| Primary Sources | 317 |
| Secondary Sources | 321 |

List of Abbreviations

- A = G. W. Leibniz, *Sämtliche Schriften und Briefe*, ed. Deutsche Akademie der Wissenschaften (Berlin: Akademie Verlag, 1923–), series I–VIII; quoted by series, volume, and page (e.g., A VI 4: 543).
- AG = G. W. Leibniz, *Philosophical Essays*, ed. and trans. R. Ariew and D. Garber (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1989).
- Ak = I. Kant, *Gesammelte Schriften*, Deutsche Akademie der Wissenschaften, 29 vols. (Berlin: Georg Reiner, 1902–38); quoted by volume and page. (The entire Academy Edition is available online at <http://www.korpora.org/kant/>).
- Arthur–Ottaviani = G. W. Leibniz, *Writings on the Metaphysics of the Infinite*, ed. and trans. R. T. W. Arthur and O. Ottaviani (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2025).
- AT = *Oeuvres de Descartes*, ed. C. Adam and P. Tannery, 11 vols. (Paris, 1887–1913; repr. Paris: Vrin, 1964–76); quoted by volume and page.
- C = G. W. Leibniz, *Opuscles et Fragments Inédits*, ed. L. Couturat (Paris: F. Alcan, 1903).
- CP = G. W. Leibniz, *Confessio Philosophi: Papers Concerning the Problem of Evil, 1671–1678*, ed. and trans. R. C. Sleigh (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1992).
- CSM = *The Philosophical Writings of Descartes*, 2 vols., ed. and trans. J. Cottingham, R. Stoothoff, and D. Murdoch (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985).
- DAC = G. W. Leibniz, *Dissertation on the Combinatorial Art*, ed. M. Mugnai, H. van Ruler, and M. Wilson (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2020).
- DM = F. Suárez, *Disputationes Metaphysicae*, 2 vols. (Hildesheim, 1966; repr. vols. 25–26 of *Opera Omnia*, Paris: Vivès, 1866); quoted by disputation, section, and paragraph (e.g., DM V, ii, 3). Online: <http://homepage.ruhr-uni-bochum.de/Michael.Renemann/suarex/index.htm>
- DPC = *The Philosophical Writings of Descartes*, vol. 3: *The Correspondence*, ed. and trans. J. Cottingham, R. Stoothoff, D. Murdoch, and A. Kenny (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991).
- DPG = G. W. Leibniz, *Dissertation on Predestination and Grace*, ed. and trans. M. J. Murray (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2011). Latin critical edition: *Meditationes Pacatae de Praedestinatione et Gratia, Fato et Libertate*, in A IV 9 N 97: 533–703.

- DS = Jakob Thomasius, *Dilucidationes Stablianae, hoc est in partem priorem Regularum Philosophicarum Danielis Stablis p.m. Praelectioniones* (Leipzig: Colerus, 1676); quoted by chapter, section, and page.
- DSR = G. W. Leibniz, *De Summa Rerum: Metaphysical Papers, 1675–76*, trans. G. H. R. Parkinson (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1992).
- Dutens = G. W. Leibniz, *Opera Omnia. Nunc primum collecta, in classes distributa*, ed. L. Dutens, 6 vols. (Geneva: De Tournes, 1768); quoted by volume and page.
- EW = *The English Works of Thomas Hobbes of Malmesbury*, ed. W. Molesworth, 11 vols. (London: John Bohn, 1839–45); quoted by volume and page.
- GI = G. W. Leibniz, *General Inquiries on the Analysis of Notions and Truths*, ed. and trans. M. Mugnai (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2021).
- GM = G. W. Leibniz, *Mathematische Schriften*, ed. C. I. Gerhardt, 7 vols. (Berlin and Halle: Asher and Schmidt, 1849–63; repr. Hildesheim: Olms, 1971); quoted by volume and page.
- GP = G. W. Leibniz, *Die philosophischen Schriften*, ed. C. I. Gerhardt, 7 vols. (Berlin: Weidmann, 1875–90); quoted by volume and page.
- Gracia = *Suárez on Individuation: Metaphysical Disputation V: Individual Unity and Its Principle*, trans. J. Gracia (Milwaukee: Marquette University Press, 1982).
- Grua = G. W. Leibniz, *Textes Inédits*, ed. G. Grua, 2 vols. (continuous pagination) (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1948).
- GW = Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*, ed. and trans. P. Guyer and A. Wood (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998).
- H = G. W. Leibniz, *Theodicy: Essays on the Goodness of God, the Freedom of Man, and the Origin of Evil*, trans. E. M. Huggard (La Salle, IL: Open Court, 1985).
- L = G. W. Leibniz, *Philosophical Papers and Letters*, ed. and trans. L. E. Loemker, 2nd ed. (Dordrecht: Kluwer, 1989).
- LA = G. W. Leibniz, *The Leibniz–Arnauld Correspondence*, ed. and trans. H. T. Mason (Manchester: Manchester University Press; New York: Barnes & Noble, 1967).
- LBr = E. Bodemann, *Der Briefwechsel des Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz in der Königlichen Öffentlichen Bibliothek zu Hannover* (Hannover: Hahn'sche Buchhandlung, 1885; repr. Hildesheim: Olms, 1966).
- LDB = G. W. Leibniz, *The Leibniz–Des Bosses Correspondence*, ed. and trans. B. C. Look and D. Rutherford (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2007).

- LDV = G. W. Leibniz, *The Leibniz–De Volder Correspondence*, ed. and trans. P. Lodge (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2013).
- LGR = G. W. Leibniz, *Leibniz on God and Religion: A Reader*, ed. and trans. L. Strickland (London and New York: Bloomsbury, 2016).
- LH = E. Bodemann, *Die Leibniz-Handschriften der Königlichen Öffentlichen Bibliothek zu Hannover* (Hannover and Leipzig: Hahn'sche Buchhandlung, 1895; repr. Hildesheim: Olms, 1966).
- LoC = G. W. Leibniz, *The Labyrinth of the Continuum: Writings on the Continuum Problem, 1672–1686*, ed. and trans. R. T. W. Arthur (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2001).
- LST = G. W. Leibniz, *The Shorter Leibniz Texts: A Collection of New Translations*, ed. and trans. L. Strickland (London: Continuum, 2006).
- LTS = G. W. Leibniz, *Leibniz and the Two Sophies: The Philosophical Correspondence*, ed. and trans. L. Strickland (Toronto: Iter Inc., 2011).
- MLI = G. W. Leibniz, *Disputatio de Principio Individui* (1663), trans. in McCullough (1996).
- MP = G. W. Leibniz, *Philosophical Writings*, ed. G. H. R. Parkinson, trans. M. Morris and G. H. R. Parkinson (London: Dent, 1973).
- NE = G. W. Leibniz, *New Essays on Human Understanding*, ed. and trans. P. Remnant and J. Bennett (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996). [Same pagination as A VI 6.]
- OL = *Opera Philosophica quae latine scripsit Thomae Hobbes Malmesburiensis*, ed. W. Molesworth, 5 vols. (London: John Bohn, 1839–45); quoted by volume and page.
- PW = G. W. Leibniz, *Political Writings*, ed. and trans. P. Riley, 2nd ed. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987).
- TP = Immanuel Kant, *Theoretical Philosophy, 1755–1770*, ed. D. Walford and R. Meerbote (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992).
- Vivès = F. Suárez, *Opera Omnia*, 28 vols., ed. C. Berton (Paris: Vivès, 1866); quoted by volume, page, and column. Online: http://cdigital.dgb.uanl.mx/la/1080042136_C/1080042136_C.html
- Vollert = F. Suárez, *On Various Kinds of Distinctions*, trans. C. Vollert (Milwaukee: Marquette University Press, 1947).
- Wells = F. Suárez, *On the Essence of Finite Beings as Such, On the Existence of That Essence and Their Distinction*, trans. N. J. Wells (Milwaukee: Marquette University Press, 1983).

Preface

This book initially originated some years ago with the idea of writing a dissertation on existence in Leibniz and Kant. Very soon, however, I realized that making sense of Leibniz's understanding of existence was a complex and intricate task – one that demanded an autonomous investigation of its own¹. For reasons that I hope will become clear throughout the book, it soon appeared evident that one could hardly, if at all, grasp Leibniz's view on existence without taking into account not only other interrelated aspects of his metaphysics (such as his theory of possible worlds), but also the diachronic development of his reflections on the topic.

Engagement with the impressive corpus of Leibniz's texts, the rich interpretive literature, and the stimulating evolution of (more or less) recent trends in contemporary metaphysics prompted a substantial reconfiguration of the initial project.

The present volume is the result of this process, and it bears the imprint of a dual approach – both historical and analytical – to the question of existence in Leibniz. Its aim is to offer a systematic reconstruction of Leibniz's views on existence, with particular emphasis on their historical development, their internal tensions, and their position within the broader framework of his metaphysical system.

The book is structured into three main parts, preceded by an introductory discussion of the problem of existence in Leibniz and culminating in a synthetic conclusion. Part One is dedicated to the early Leibniz, focusing on his treatment of existence in relation to individuation, truth, perception, and the ontological argument. Part Two traces the emergence of Leibniz's mature metaphysics of possible worlds and explores how this framework reshapes – but never fully resolves – the conceptual difficulties surrounding the status of existence. These are further explored in Part Three, which argues for the need to distinguish and relate modal and ontological dimensions of the concept of existence.

1. The Introductory chapter, titled “The Puzzle of Existence: From Russell to Leibniz”, frames the central problem of the book by revisiting Bertrand Russell's influential interpretation of Leibniz. In particular, it examines Russell's claim that Leibniz treats existence as the only contingent predicate – thereby excluding it from his general theory of conceptual containment. This claim, despite its known limitations, captures a real and persistent tension in Leibniz's thought: how can a system that grounds truth in the analytic inclusion of predicates within complete concepts account for the contingency of existence? This

1 On Kant and Leibniz, see the recent volume edited by Look (2021). Cf. also Nachtomy (2012) and (2017).

tension – what I call “the puzzle of existence”² – centres on how something “more” is found in an existing thing’s concept than in a merely possible one, without treating existence as a simple predicate. The chapter surveys how this puzzle has been addressed by later commentators and introduces the interpretive strategy adopted in the book: namely, to treat the tension not as a flaw to be resolved but as a structural feature of Leibniz’s metaphysics, one that reflects his attempt to integrate divergent philosophical strands into a unified system.

A central thesis of the book is that Leibniz theorizes existence on three distinct but interrelated levels: the phenomenological (real vs. imaginary), the ontological (concrete vs. abstract), and the modal (actual vs. possible). While Leibniz never systematized these distinctions explicitly, they are shown to underlie his various treatments of existence across different domains. Particular attention is paid to the notion of “possible individuals”, which, although lacking actuality from a modal standpoint, must nonetheless be distinguished from abstract essences – mirroring the ontological difference between concrete and abstract entities even at the level of possibility. The distinction between modality, ontology, and phenomenology also constitutes the lens through which the analysis of Leibniz’s evolving account of existence is investigated throughout the book.

1.1 The first part of the book primarily focuses on Leibniz’s early views on existence, specifically from 1663 to 1672. It argues that, during this period, the distinction between essence and existence is understood chiefly as a contrast between the abstract and the concrete, rather than between the possible and the actual. An analysis of these early texts proves essential for understanding the subsequent evolution of Leibniz’s thought, which begins during his Paris period – especially in the highly productive years of 1675–1676 – and culminates in his first years in Hanover³.

2 I borrow this label from Goldschmidt (2013), where, however, it indicates the more general metaphysical question: “Why is there something rather than nothing?”. Rescher (1984) calls it “the riddle of existence”. As is well known, also this question can be traced back to Leibniz (see GP VI 602/AG 210). For the reasons why I privilege the formulation of the puzzle mentioned in the main text above, see the Introduction and Chapter 9, §7 below.

3 On Leibniz’s intellectual biography, the reference work is Antognazza (2008). Throughout the book, I discuss Leibniz’s views on existence in relation to some historical precedents as well as some contemporary views. My main interest, however, was to study Leibniz’s account of existence and its own development, and I made no serious attempt to describe Leibniz’s place within the broader and more general picture of the development of the notion of existence (and being) in the Late Medieval and Early Modern period. On this, in addition to the seminal book by Gilson (1994), see Bardout (2014) and (2025). Cf. also Munitz (1974), and the essays collected in Knuutila-Hintikka (1986).

Chapter 1 opens the section with a close reading of Leibniz's 1663 disputation *De principio individui*. This chapter reconstructs the young Leibniz's commitment to a form of conceptual nominalism, in which individuals are individuated not by a distinct metaphysical principle but by their "whole being" (*tota entitate*). This solution is interpreted as a nominalist strategy for "cutting the knot" of the problem of individuation. At this stage, Leibniz rejects both the Thomist *real distinction* between essence and existence and the Scotist *formal distinction*, arguing instead that any such distinction holds only *in intellectu* (in the intellect), not *in re* (in reality). Unactualized essences are equated with imaginary entities or undifferentiated "primary matter", reflecting a stance that denies reality to merely potential beings.

Chapter 2 explores the influence of Leibniz's teacher, Jakob Thomasius (1622–1684), on his early nominalism – particularly with regard to eternal truths and the status of essences. This influence is already visible in the 1663 disputation, which, while defended by the young Leibniz, primarily reflects Thomasius' views. Thomasius maintained that the eternity of essences could be attributed only to God's understanding and not to anything existing *extra Deum*. He held a deflationary view of potential being, identifying it with non-being and restricting metaphysics to what is actual. For Thomasius, "essences" are nothing more than necessary propositions grounded in God's intellect, not eternal entities in their own right. This austere nominalism – denying ontological status to mere possibilities – had a significant formative impact on Leibniz's early metaphysics.

Chapter 3 turns to the period from 1663 to 1672, during which Leibniz characterizes metaphysics as a *System of Theorems* – that is, as a body of hypothetical truths, in contrast to the domain of physics, which deals with actual entities and is grounded in sense perception. This view is influenced by Thomas Hobbes's *De Corpore* (1655). In his 1670 Preface to *Nizolius*, Leibniz explicitly endorses a nominalist program: abstract terms in philosophy are to be eliminated or reduced to concrete predicates. During this period, "clear and distinct conceivability" is treated as the criterion of possibility. But this criterion is weak, as Leibniz often equates merely possible entities with fictions, and fails to draw a clear line between genuinely possible essences and merely imaginary ones.

This nominalist stance has significant implications for the ontological argument, which is the focus of Chapter 4. Initially, Leibniz rejects Descartes' version of the argument, describing it as a "paralogism" – a circular or question-begging argument. He sides with Gassendi's critique, which holds that existence is not a perfection that can be deduced from the concept of God. However, during his last year in Paris (1675–76), Leibniz begins to reconsider the ontological argument, no longer seeing it as flawed but merely incomplete. He introduces the idea of a possibility proof – an argument intended to show that the concept of a most perfect being does not involve contradiction. This shift suggests that, for Leibniz, existence may indeed be a perfection necessarily

belonging to God's essence. The ontological argument thus becomes a testing ground for various accounts of the relation between essence and existence – a theme that reappears throughout the book.

Chapter 5 introduces what I describe as Leibniz's early *phenomenology of existence*. Drawing on texts from the late Mainz and early Paris years, this chapter argues that Leibniz initially conceives existence not as an ontological category, but as a mark of distinct perceivability. His "provisional phenomenalism" seeks to distinguish real from imaginary phenomena through criteria such as regularity, coherence, and causal connection. For finite minds, these criteria offer a provisional standard of reality – though ultimately, real existence is guaranteed by divine perception and universal harmony (understood as equivalent in this period). In this context, what exists is what can be perceived without contradiction and in accordance with the lawful order of appearances. This phenomenological conception of existence, though later absorbed into Leibniz's broader metaphysical system, remains a distinctive strand in his thought, resurfacing in his mature discussions of perception, reality, and the distinction between the actual and the imaginary⁴.

1.2 The second part of the book examines the transformation of Leibniz's views on existence in light of his development of the theory of possible worlds. It focuses on the period extending from his Paris years to the early Hanover years (late 1670s onward), which marks the decisive turning point in his metaphysics and in his understanding of the distinction between essence and existence. The introductory section to this part distinguishes between two strands in Leibniz's account of possible worlds – one teleological/theological, the other cosmological – and shows how they eventually converge in his mature system.

Chapter 6 begins the inquiry by analysing the role of the *series rerum*, or ordered series of things, in the emergence of Leibniz's modal metaphysics. Initially, Leibniz posits only one such series: the actual world, which is spatially, temporally, and causally unified into a coherent whole. At this stage, non-actualized possibilities are not yet conceived as organized into distinct worlds; they are instead often equated with imaginary entities. This early view, especially evident in the *Confessio Philosophi* (1672–73), leans toward a form of necessitarianism, implying that God could not have created anything other than this complete "package" of interconnected beings. The chapter traces how Leibniz gradually moves away from this view, seeking to avoid necessitarian implications and instead make room for contingency and divine freedom. This marks a pivotal development: existence is now primarily understood as *actuality* – the distinguishing mark of the one world chosen by God from among infinite possibilities.

Chapter 7 describes the crucial development of Leibniz's theory of possible worlds as a response to necessitarianism, allowing for the contingency of the

4 For a recent, stimulating discussion, see Oliveri (2021:129ff).

actual world and God's free choice of the best. In various texts, Leibniz argues against the existence of a plurality of actual worlds, maintaining that if multiple actual but disconnected worlds existed, the principle of bivalence (the requirement that every proposition be either true or false) would break down, rendering it impossible to determine what truly exists. For Leibniz, the term *world* refers to the totality of what exists, and he eventually rejects the early flirtations with the idea of multiple actual worlds found in his Paris writings. In his mature metaphysics, possible worlds exist solely as ideas in God's understanding. The chapter examines Leibniz's rejection of actual-world pluralism, his commitment to a singular best possible world, and the implications this has for the ontological status of merely possible individuals. Particular attention is given to the question of what it means for something to be "possible but not actual", and how this affects the ontological status of merely possible individuals.

1.3 The third part of the book offers a detailed investigation of Leibniz's metaphysics of existence, using the distinction between modal and ontological accounts of existence to reconcile two central aspects of his thought: his actualism – that is, the claim that only actual beings (God and created substances) truly exist – and his metaphysics of possible worlds, particularly concerning the status of merely possible individuals.

Chapter 8 addresses the question of whether existence possesses a *ratio formalis* – that is, whether it can be defined or grounded in any formal concept. The chapter explores Leibniz's vacillation among several interpretations of existence: as a perfection, as a relational determination, or as a purely positional act (such as a divine *fiat*). The chapter also discusses the distinction between the *a priori* (perfection-based) and *a posteriori* (perception-based) accounts of existence, resorting to the notion of harmony to bridge the gap between these two perspectives. This discussion reveals the unresolved status of existence within Leibniz's metaphysical framework, despite his repeated attempts to integrate it. Ultimately, explaining why the actual world exists requires what Leibniz describes as an "infinite analysis", rooted in the Pauline *altitudo divitiarum* – the "depth and abyss of divine wisdom".

In his mature metaphysics, Leibniz confronts the puzzle of existence directly: how can existence add something to an essence without being a simple predicate? And why does *this* set of possibles exist rather than another? His response involves the concept of *existurientia*, or "striving for existence", which suggests that possible beings possess a kind of inner tendency toward actualization, proportional to their degree of perfection or reality. Though fascinating, this idea is philosophically problematic. On the one hand, it seems to endow possible beings with an intrinsic dynamic that runs counter to Leibniz's creationist commitments – according to which reality is bestowed solely by God.

On the other hand, it challenges Leibniz's actualism, which denies that non-actual beings exist in any proper sense. Chapter 9 reconsiders the puzzle of existence in light of Leibniz's mature theory of possible worlds, with particular emphasis on whether possible individuals possess any meaningful kind of existence prior to actualization. The chapter argues that possible individuals are fundamentally *complete individual concepts*, existing as ideas in God's understanding. The notion of *existurientia* is then reinterpreted as a qualified or "existential" modality, marking the status of possible individuals *qua* candidates for creation.

Chapter 10 turns explicitly to the complex interplay between modality and ontology in Leibniz's mature system. It highlights a tension between two commitments: the actualist stance that only actual beings exist, and the need for an enriched ontology that accounts for the intelligibility and structure of possible individuals. This tension is particularly evident in Leibniz's ambivalent treatment of the phrase "possible existence" – which he sometimes rejects as incoherent but elsewhere appears to affirm. The chapter clarifies that for Leibniz, "existence" properly refers to actuality, while "possible existence" pertains to the capacity for being. A crucial distinction emerges between "possibles as essences" (i.e., incomplete, general notions such as mathematical concepts) and "possible individuals" (i.e., complete, non-actualized concepts of individual creatures). While the former are necessarily non-actual, the latter are contingently so. The actuality of any individual is ultimately grounded in "something in its possible notion" that made it worthy of divine selection within the best possible world. The chapter also disentangles the ontological distinction (abstract vs. concrete entities, where both actual and possible individuals count as concrete) from the modal distinction (possible vs. actual).

The chapter concludes by summarizing Leibniz's metaphysics of existence. While Leibniz sought a unified and coherent account, the book argues that his writings reveal persistent ambiguities – ambiguities that stem from his simultaneous engagement with phenomenological, ontological, and modal perspectives on being. Drawing on both textual evidence and conceptual analysis, I argue that the multiplicity of Leibniz's accounts of existence reflects an effort to preserve explanatory unity while safeguarding essential philosophical distinctions.

The Conclusion brings together the main threads of the argument and offers a synthetic account of Leibniz's metaphysical commitments. Rather than proposing a single, reductive theory of existence, Leibniz develops a layered conception, in which existence functions simultaneously as a phenomenological marker, an ontological condition, and a modal status. Far from revealing inconsistency, this plural structure demonstrates the depth and complexity of Leibniz's metaphysical project. In this sense, the book does not aim to eliminate the ambiguities in Leibniz's account of existence but rather to illuminate their sources, contexts, and internal logic.

2. The structure of this book is shaped by both the historical development of Leibniz's views and the systematic questions that animate them. Each part corresponds to a significant shift in his conception of existence, and each chapter balances close textual analysis with broader conceptual argumentation. The three parts together trace a trajectory from Leibniz's early views to his mature metaphysics, structured around the conceptual apparatus of individual concepts, divine ideas, and the logic of possible worlds. While the book broadly follows a chronological arc, it does not aim to offer a full reconstruction of Leibniz's metaphysical development. Rather, it seeks to uncover the implicit presuppositions and philosophical tensions that animate Leibniz's treatment of existence across different stages of his thought.

I must warn the reader that the chapters in the first part of this book follow a rather strict chronological order – though with some exceptions in Chapters 4 and 5 – because I was particularly interested in highlighting the changes in Leibniz's views during his early years. A similar approach applies to Chapter 6 and part of Chapter 7, which can be considered an attempt at an ideal reconstruction of the genesis of Leibniz's theory of possible worlds. By contrast, Chapters 8 to 10 do not follow a strict chronological order. At first glance, one might think this is because, while we have complete editions of Leibniz's philosophical writings and correspondence up to 1690, the availability and chronology of his later writings remain tentative. However, this is not the real reason for my choice. As far as I can tell, while Leibniz's views on existence and modality undergo significant changes in his early years, they remain largely stable in the period stretching (roughly) from the *Discourse on Metaphysics* (1686) to the *Theodicy* (1710)⁵. Accordingly, I found no compelling reason to maintain a strict chronological order in these chapters, and I did not hesitate to draw on texts from different periods when appropriate.

From a methodological point of view, the book combines historical reconstruction with conceptual analysis. Where relevant, I also draw on resources from contemporary metaphysics to illuminate the structure and implications of Leibniz's claims, while remaining attentive to the historical specificity of his formulations. This dual approach is partly motivated by my decision, in the General Introduction, to begin with Russell's interpretation of Leibniz in his seminal 1900 book. Russell explicitly stated that his aim was a "critical examination" of Leibniz's philosophy, rather than a historical reconstruction. However,

5 Of course, this is true only of the issues discussed in this book. There are many aspects of Leibniz's philosophy, including his account of substance, which underwent some (more or less) substantive changes in his late writings. On the development of Leibniz's theory of substance from the *Discourse* to the late *Monadology*, see Fichant (2004). For another example, see Ottaviani (2022), where I argue that in his late writings (from 1707 onwards), Leibniz characterizes composite substances in terms of *substantiata*, and makes several attempts to distinguish between primitive and derivative substance.

I see no reason why these two approaches must be in conflict. As I argue, much of the debate surrounding Leibniz's account of existence, contingency, and modality – both in historical and systematic terms – has stemmed, directly or indirectly, from the problems Russell raised, further developed through advancements in modal logic, metaphysics, and the philosophy of language⁶.

When drawing comparisons between early modern authors and contemporary views, the spectre of anachronism is always present. Nevertheless, I hope I have managed to dispel it – or at least reduce it to a minimum. In this sense, my dual approach to Leibniz seems not only defensible, but necessary. Just as historical comparisons – e.g., with Aristotelian or Scholastic sources – can shed light on Leibniz's views, so too can a comparison with contemporary positions. Such parallels are often useful not because they emphasize similarity, but precisely because they highlight fundamental differences. A recurring theme in this book is that Leibniz's approach to the philosophical question of existence cannot be separated from his theological concerns – especially since, for him, metaphysics was essentially “rational theology”⁷. This dimension has been almost entirely overlooked by Russell and much of the Anglophone literature that followed in his wake, which tended to distinguish a supposed core of Leibniz's “secular” metaphysics from theological doctrines he was allegedly compelled to accept⁸.

I also stress the importance of tracing the development of Leibniz's views on existence in order to avoid one-sided readings such as those advanced by Benson Mates and Robert Adams. These authors, while contributing significantly to our understanding of Leibniz, tended to focus on those aspects of his philosophy that intersect most directly with contemporary debates. That said, in some cases – such as Chapters 7 and 10 – I have not hesitated to paraphrase certain difficult aspects of Leibniz's theory using tools from contemporary philosophy, when such paraphrase seemed both faithful and helpful in presenting his views more clearly and avoiding ambiguities in the original formulations.

Of course, my interpretation of Leibniz's texts may be contested in whole or in part. It may be argued that it fails to capture the precise sense of Leibniz's

6 It also seems to me that the discussion of topics like existence, actuality, possible worlds, etc., could not avoid to take into account a certain kind of literature: for a recent example in this sense, see Robert Adams' last book (Adams 2021). The same holds in the case of Leibniz's theory of time and space, cf. Futch (2008), Arthur (2021).

7 In a short note drafted in his late years, Leibniz writes: «I begin as a philosopher, but I end as a theologian. One of my great principles is that nothing happens without a reason. That is a principle of philosophy. Yet at bottom, it is nothing other than an acknowledgment of divine wisdom, although I do not speak of it at first (*Je commence en philosophe, mais je finis en theologien. Un de mes grands principes est que rien ne se fait sans raison. C'est un principe de philosophie. Cependant dans le fonds ce n'est autre chose que l'aveu de la sagesse divine, quoique je n'en parle pas d'abord*) (LH IV, 1, 4k, Bl. 39).

8 The importance of theological writings to a more comprehensive understanding of Leibniz's philosophy is one of the main achievements of the pioneering book by Antognazza (1999); for the English version see Antognazza (2007). Cf. also Backus (2016).

theory. Yet, in principle, I do not see anything methodologically problematic in this kind of approach to an early modern author – provided that sufficient textual evidence is offered and that the differences between Leibniz’s views and those of contemporary thinkers are made explicit⁹.

Throughout, the aim is not to assimilate Leibniz’s views to present-day theories, nor to judge them according to anachronistic standards. Rather, I aim to show that Leibniz’s metaphysics of existence, when properly understood in its historical and systematic context, offers a distinctive and philosophically rich account of the nature of being, possibility, and actuality – one that continues to challenge and refine our own assumptions about what it means for something to exist.

3. This book has taken shape over many years, beginning as a doctoral dissertation (defended at the Scuola Normale Superiore di Pisa in November 2018) and evolving, through countless revisions and conversations, into its present form. I owe deep gratitude to those who have supported, challenged, and accompanied me throughout this journey.

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9 From a meta-methodological point of view, I acknowledge that – when interpreting an author like Leibniz – I tend to favour a plurality of methodological approaches over strict parsimony. For a philosophical defence of this kind of methodological pluralism, see Nozick (1981). Ultimately, the viability of such an approach must be left to the judgment of the reader.

I would also like to thank Stefano Di Bella once again for his help, support, and for consistently encouraging me to complete this book – a task I would not have accomplished without his insistence. Over the last few years, I have had the opportunity to present and discuss parts of this work on various occasions and have received valuable feedback from many colleagues, far too numerous to name here. I must also acknowledge my deep intellectual debt to the following scholars: Richard Arthur, Alessandro Becchi, Vincenzo De Risi, Michael Futch, Niccolò Guicciardini, Michael Kempe, Ohad Nachtomy, Enrico Pasini, Francesco Piro, Donald Rutherford, and the late Maria Rosa Antognazza and Marine Picon. I am also grateful to two anonymous referees, whose thoughtful comments and suggestions were instrumental in improving the final version of this book. Last but not least, many thanks to Andrea Guardo for his help with the editing of the volume.

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Introduction. The Puzzle of Existence. From Russell to Leibniz

1. Russell on Leibniz on Existence

There is no more thorough-paced philosopher than Leibniz, and the relations of essence and existence are the very crux of his system; yet he tells almost nothing about Existence except that it is contingent and not a predicate, and he half retracts these. He never intimates, for example, how he can tell that *he* is a member of the existent world and not a mere possible monad on the shelf of essence.
(Williams 1962: 751–752)¹

This quote is taken from a paper defending the Humean view that “existence makes no difference”². In a sense, it summarizes a series of problems that will be addressed in these preliminary remarks and will serve as the guiding thread in my investigation of Leibniz’s notion of existence. The account, however, is not original to the author of that paper – D. C. Williams – but, as he himself acknowledges, is a summary of conclusions Bertrand Russell reached in his seminal book on Leibniz’s philosophy, originally published in 1900.

As summarized in the above quotation, Russell argues that, according to what he takes to be Leibniz’s considered view, existence is (a) contingent and (b) not a predicate. Although this is Russell’s own terminology, I interpret (b) as the claim that existence is not a property of individuals (see below). According to Russell, the peculiarity of Leibniz’s position lies in the fact that existential propositions constitute the entire class of synthetic propositions (in the Kantian sense); in other words: there are no synthetic propositions besides existential ones.

Russell also noted that Leibniz’s views on both (a) and (b) are not always consistent. Some texts suggest that Leibniz regarded existence as a predicate, and others imply that existence may be a necessary, rather than contingent, property.

In the first edition of his book, Russell diagnosed the internal inconsistency of Leibniz’s account as stemming from his commitment to two conflicting views: on the one hand, that the existence of finite things (created individual substances) is contingent and cannot be derived from the notions of finite

1 On the problem of the “shelf of essence” in Leibniz, see also Look (2005).

2 Cf. Smithurst (1980–81). For a survey of different solutions on the question of existence, see the essays contained in Leslie–Lawrence Kuhn (2013). From the historical point of view, a broad investigation of the development of the notion of existence has been proposed by Bardout (2014) and (2025).

things, i.e., is not analytically derivable from the complete concept of the individual; on the other hand, that the existence of God is necessary and derivable from his essence – since Leibniz endorsed the ontological argument. In Russell’s Kantian terminology, a proposition like “Peter exists” is synthetic and contingent, whereas “God exists” is analytic and necessary³.

One might object that this is a false dilemma, as it overlooks a third alternative: that “existence” is not univocal. One might plausibly argue that existence does not have the same features in the case of divine being as in the case of created beings. Yet although Leibniz accepts the distinction between necessary existence (in the case of God) and contingent existence (in the case of creatures), he clearly treats this as a distinction in the modal status of existence, not as a difference in the meaning of the term itself. On this point, Russell was right: there are passages in which Leibniz explicitly insists on the univocity of fundamental metaphysical concepts, especially the concept of “being”⁴.

1.1. The Synthetic Nature of Existential Statements

A crucial aspect of Russell’s analysis is the Kantian framework from which it proceeds. The distinction between necessary and contingent propositions is immediately understood in terms of the Kantian distinction between analytic and synthetic judgments. Hence, Russell concludes that Leibniz’s view of existential propositions as synthetic anticipates Kant’s thesis that existence is not a reality (or determination) but the absolute positing of a thing with all its predicates.

Russell’s reading of Leibniz, as is well known, is grounded in the analysis of propositions. This includes his treatment of existence, which he approaches through the lens of the distinction between necessary and contingent propositions:

Contingent propositions, in Leibniz’s system, are, speaking generally, such as assert actual existence. The exception which this statement requires, in the case of the necessary existence of God, may be provided for by saying that contingent propositions are such as involve a reference to parts of time. [...] Thus, necessary propositions are such as have no reference to actual time, or such as – except in the case of God – do not assert the existence of their subjects. [...] But propositions about contingency itself, and all that can be said generally about the nature

3 Cf. in particular §§8, 12, 13, 107–108 (Russell 1992: 11–12, 26–28, 29–35, and 203–206, respectively).

4 One of the most explicit passages is in a dialogue written between 1677 and 1679, *Dialogus inter Theologum et Misosophum*. Against the claim that «*principia humana non sunt accommodata rebus divinis* (human principles do not apply to divine things)», Leibniz replies: «The principles of natural science, I agree, are only human [...]; but the principles of metaphysics are common to divine and human things, for they dwell with being in general, which is common to both God and creatures» (A VI 4: 2215). For a discussion of Leibniz’s various ways of combining analogy and univocity of being, see Grua (1953: 55ff).

of possible contingents, are not contingent; on the contrary, if the contingent be what actually exists, any proposition about what might exist must be necessary. (Russell 1992: 25–26)

The core idea is that every proposition, for Leibniz, reduces to the attribution of a predicate to a subject, with the sole exception of existence claims. This follows from Leibniz's principle that all the properties of an individual (i.e., all that it will ever display over time) are already contained in its complete concept. This is Leibniz's *conceptual containment theory of truth*. The only exception to it is actual existence: «Existence alone, among predicates, is not contained in the notions of subjects which exist. Thus existential propositions, except in the case of God's existence, are synthetic» (Russell 1992: 9).

This is the only way to preserve the contingency of created beings. If existence were just another predicate, it would be included in the complete notion of the individual and thus be analytically derivable. Given the (Kantian) identification of analyticity with necessity, it would follow that all things exist necessarily⁵. This leads directly to one of Russell's main conclusions: *existence is the only contingent feature an individual can have*.

It is important to emphasize that Russell is speaking only of *actual* existence. He states that necessary truths are those that do not refer to actual time or do not assert the existence of their subjects. This conception of necessity applies not only to general truths about essences (i.e., genus-species relations) but also to truths about individual subjects. Russell's point is that statements about what might exist are themselves necessary, since contingency pertains only to actuality. This is what Russell has in mind when he notes that propositions about contingency itself (i.e., about what might exist/have existed) are not contingent, for contingency should be ascribed to actual existence only⁶.

Thus, for Leibniz, the notion of an individual includes existence only *sub ratione possibilitatis* – that is, its concept is exactly what it would be if it existed, but the concept itself does not entail actual existence:

5 «Necessary propositions are such as are analytic, and synthetic propositions are always contingent» (Russell 1992: 9). The relevance of the book on Leibniz for the understanding of Russell's philosophy has been discussed by Griffin (2012). See also Arthur (2018a). A book on Russell's reading of Leibniz, authored by Richard Arthur and Nicholas Griffin, is forthcoming.

6 Being committed still to a somewhat Kantian understanding of modality, Russell took this claim as equivalent to the idea that truths about the possibles are eternally true. In his 1918 lectures on the philosophy of logical atomism, Russell continues to defend the view that modality can be ascribed to propositional functions (i.e., concepts) only, and not to things, and that it has to be interpreted in a temporal way (for instance, a propositional function is necessary if it is always true). Cf. Russell (2009: 64–65).

The notion of an individual, as Leibniz puts it, involves reference to existence and time *sub ratione possibilitatis*⁷; i.e., the notion is exactly what it would be if the individual existed, but the existence is merely possible, and is not, in the mere notion, judged to be actual. (Russell 1992: 26)

Let me insist nevertheless that Leibniz's idea is that the possibility of individuals differs from the possibility of species, because the former (but not the latter) involve in their notions the possibility of their causes. Russell, however, does not take this as sufficient for Leibniz to have integrated contingency into the complete concept. Instead, Russell interprets it as a kind of parallelism between the possible and the actual: the structure of possible causes mirrors that of actual causes, and actuality is grounded in possibility – at least from God's perspective. «So long as we do not assert actual existence», writes Russell, «we are still in the region of eternal truths». Contingency, properly speaking, comes to the fore only when actuality is posited:

It is in taking the further step, in judging the actual existence of the individual whose notion is in question, that the law of sufficient reason becomes indispensable, and gives results to which the law of contradiction is, by itself, inadequate [...]. Existence is thus unique among predicates. All other predicates are contained in the notion of the subject, and may be asserted of it in a purely analytic judgment. The assertion of existence, alone among predicates, is synthetic, and, therefore, in Leibniz's view, contingent. (Russell 1992: 27–28)

Russell concludes that, had Leibniz fully applied this doctrine to God, he would have essentially denied that existence is a predicate. In a passage from the *New Essays* (as well as elsewhere), however, he notes that Leibniz explicitly treats existence as a notion or an idea that is predicated of a subject in a proposition⁸. This prevents Russell from fully aligning Leibniz with the Kantian account of existence.

1.2. Russell Between Leibniz and Kant

Russell's conclusion, however, can be supported by a direct appeal to Kant. In his 1763 essay *The Only Possible Argument in Support of a Demonstration of the Existence of God*, Kant famously defends the claim that «existence is not a predicate or a determination of a thing»:

Take any subject you please, for example, Julius Caesar. Draw up a list of all the predicates which may be thought to belong to him, not excepting those of space

7 For the sake of clarity, think of a proposition like “Alexander the Great died in 323 BC”, which, when written down in this form, is eternally true.

8 Cf. *New Essays*, IV, i, §3: «When we say that a thing exists, or has real existence, this existence itself is the predicate, i.e., it has a notion joined to the idea in question, and there is connection between these two notions» (A VI 6: 358; I follow Russell's translation here).

and time. You will quickly see that he can either exist with all these determinations, or not exist at all. The Being who gave existence to the world and to our hero within that world could know every single one of these predicates without exception, and yet still be able to regard him as a merely possible thing which, in the absence of that Being's decision to create him, would not exist. Who can deny that millions of things which do not actually exist are merely possible from the point of view of all the predicates they would contain if they were to exist. Or who can deny that in the representation which the Supreme Being has of them there is not a single determination missing, although existence is not among them, for the Supreme Being cognises them only as possible things. It cannot happen, therefore, that if they were to exist they would contain an extra predicate; for, in the case of the possibility of a thing in its complete determination, no predicate at all can be missing. (Ak II: 72/TP 117–118)

A few pages later, Kant resorts to a striking image: «If I imagine God uttering His almighty “*Let there be*” over a possible world, He does not grant any new determinations to the whole. Rather, He posits the series of things absolutely and unconditionally, and posits it with all its predicates» (Ak II: 74/TP 120). This amounts to saying that existence is the *absolute positing* of a thing with all its predicates – distinct from the relative positing of predicates within a proposition. This extra-propositional view of existence is explicitly framed in terms of possible worlds and, in this sense, seems to be very close to Leibniz's view. This should not be too surprising, all things considered. Kant's image, indeed, closely echoes a key passage in Leibniz's *Theodicy*:

Since [...] God's decree consists solely in the resolution he forms, after having compared all possible worlds, to choose that one which is the best, and bring it into existence together with all this worlds contains, by means of the all-powerful word *Fiat*, it is plain to see that this decree changes nothing in the constitution of things: God leaves them just as they were in the state of mere possibility, that is, changing nothing either in their essence or nature, or even in their accidents, which are represented perfectly already in the idea of this possible world. (*Theodicy*, §52, GP VI 131/H 154–155)⁹

The resemblance is striking: both emphasize God's creative act as holistic, bringing an entire world into being without altering any of its intrinsic features. God's decree changes nothing in the constitution of things from the way they are represented “in the state of mere possibility”. Yet unlike Kant, Leibniz

9 Kant's acquaintance with the *Theodicy* dates back at least to 1753, when he was working on an essay for a prize-essay competition of the Academy of Berlin. See Kant's unpublished reflections, nn. 3703–5, Ak. XVII: 229–239, as well as his short 1759 paper, *An Attempt at Some Reflections on Optimism*, Ak II: 27–35 (TP 77–83, and 67–76, respectively). On the reception of *Theodicy* in Germany, see Lorenz (1997).

never concludes that existence is the absolute position of a thing with all its predicates – although this seems to follow from his own premises.

Instead, Leibniz uses this framework to reconcile a strong form of determinism with the distinction between necessary and contingent properties. God's *fiat* determines which world exists, but does not determine what is essential or accidental to the things in it – that distinction is fixed at the level of possibility, independently of God's will. As Leibniz writes: «Thus that which is contingent and free remains no less so under the decrees of God than under His prevision» (GP VI 131/H 155). I shall return later to this tension between the necessity of essences and the contingency of existence on the one hand, and the preservation of the essential/accidental distinction within any world (or “series of things”) on the other.

2. Conceptual Containment and Existence

2.1. Couturat vs. Russell on Existence

Russell's 1900 analysis may be summarized as follows: (1) actual existence is, for Leibniz, the only contingent feature that can be ascribed to an individual; and (2) all truths concerning possible things are necessary. The first point amounts to acknowledging an exception to the predicate-in-subject account of truth. The second point, however, is reconsidered by Russell after 1903, i.e., after the publication of Louis Couturat's book on Leibniz's logic (1901) and his edition of Leibniz's unpublished papers (1903). This change of mind is already evident in Russell's 1903 review of Couturat's works in *Mind*, and reiterated in the preface to the new edition of his book published in 1937.

Against Russell's original claim, Couturat challenged, in particular, the viability of the distinction between analytic and synthetic propositions, arguing that all propositions – including existential ones – must be considered analytic insofar as they can, in principle (at least by God), be derived from the theory of truth based on conceptual containment¹⁰.

As far as existence is concerned, however, Russell did not fully accept Couturat's account. While Couturat is substantially committed to the idea that existence is analytically derivable from a thing's concept (via the notion of perfection), Russell still perceives a significant tension between this position (which he now sees as more dominant than he had believed in 1900) and the opposing

10 In particular, Couturat emphasized the possibility of deriving the whole of Leibniz's metaphysical theses from the conceptual containment account of truth as presented by Leibniz himself in an unpublished text on *Primary Truths* (now edited as *Principia Logico-Metaphysica* in A VI 4: 1643–1649), which Couturat edited for the very first time; see in particular, Couturat (1902). On Russell's reading of Couturat, see Russell (1903), as well as his 1937 new preface to his book on Leibniz (Russell 1992: xiii–xviii). On the difference between Russell's and Couturat's readings, see Anfray (2017).

view, according to which nothing more is found in the concept of an existing thing than in that of the corresponding possible one. This opposing view gives rise to the particular problem that, throughout this book, I will refer as the *puzzle of existence*: if in the notion of a purely possible Adam there is nothing more than in the notion of the actual Adam¹¹ – of course, with the only exception of actual existence – then what exactly is the nature of actual existence, or that which allows us to distinguish an actual individual from its corresponding possibility?

2.2. The Superessentialist Account: Russell Vindicated

If I have insisted on Russell's views, it is because I am convinced that much of the subsequent debate on existence and contingency in Leibniz is essentially a footnote to Russell – albeit fascinating and philosophically intriguing. This is particularly true regarding the debate on Leibnizian *superessentialism*, which may be viewed as a continuation and a conceptual refinement or reappraisal of Russell's original research program.

Since the time of the publication of Russell's book, Leibniz scholarship has, of course, evolved – not only through the publication of many texts unknown both to Russell and Couturat (which have illuminated various aspects of Leibniz's philosophical development) – but also through a new interpretative lens, inspired by the rise of possible-worlds semantics after Kripke's seminal works in the 1960s and its applications in modal metaphysics¹².

The key difference from Russell's analysis is that the investigation of necessity and contingency is now explicitly framed in terms of possible worlds, rather than through a Kantian distinction between analytic and synthetic truths. The *superessentialist reading* – defended, for instance, by scholars like Benson Mates and Fabrizio Mondadori – is committed to the view that the distinction

11 Cf. Leibniz to Arnauld, 14 July 1686: «All actuality can be conceived of as possible, and if the actual Adam has in the course of time a particular posterity, one cannot deny this same predicate to this Adam conceived of as possible, all the more so because you concede that God envisages all these predicates in him when He resolves to create him» (A II 2: 79 or GP II 55/LA 62). The problem can be easily generalized to the whole world, because, each individual concept mirrors its own (possible) world; as he explains to Arnauld, Leibniz chose to create this Adam because it belongs to this particular world: «every individual substance of this universe expresses in its concept the universe into which it enters. And not only the assumption that God decided to create this particular Adam, but also that of any other individual substance whatever contains decisions made for everything else, because it is in the nature of an individual substance to have such a complete concept, whence can be inferred everything that one can attribute to it, and even the whole universe because of the connexions between things. Nonetheless, *in order to proceed with accuracy, one must say that it is not so much because God decided to create this Adam that he decided everything else, but that the decisions which he takes regarding both Adam and other particular things are a consequence of the decision he takes regarding the whole universe* [...]» (A II 2: 47–48 or GP II 41/LA 44, italics mine). Cf. also a very clear passage in Grua (1953: 345).

12 For a good introduction to these topics, see Loux (1979).

between necessity and contingency can ultimately be traced back to an (implicit or explicit) intuition of the difference between truths that hold in every possible world and those that hold only in some.

For simplicity, I will focus on two paradigmatic and opposed accounts: Mates's superessentialist reading and Robert Adams's contingentist interpretation, the latter having been explicitly designed to counter the former¹³. To understand how Mates's reading might be understood as a "radicalization" of Russell's views, however, some preliminary remarks are needed. In addition to a possible-worlds semantics, a crucial component of the superessentialist reading is its link with a logical/philosophical account of existence – an account also defended by Russell in his later theoretical works. As I noted above, Russell in 1900 still framed the question of existence in terms of whether existence is a *predicate*. By contrast, contemporary debates focus on whether existence is a *property of individuals* or not.

2.3. Predicates or Properties?

The distinction between properties and individuals is typically introduced via the notion of *instantiation* (or *exemplification*): individuals instantiate properties but cannot themselves be instantiated, while properties may be instantiated by individuals or less general properties. The question of whether existence is a property of individuals thus amounts to asking whether "existence" denotes a property that a specific individual (e.g., Alexander the Great) instantiates – and, ultimately, whether there exist individuals who lack this property (i.e., merely possible or fictional ones)¹⁴.

The shift from talking about "predicates" to talking about "properties" might seem trivial, assuming a one-to-one correspondence between predicates (linguistic level) and properties (ontological level). This is the so-called *abundant conception* of properties, often contrasted with the *sparse* view. If one accepts the former, then existence must be a property of individuals, since "existent" is a predicate. At the linguistic level – in natural language, at least – there is little doubt that "existent" behaves like other ordinary predicates. There are reasons, however, to question the presumed alignment between linguistic and ontological levels¹⁵.

From Leibniz's standpoint, the abundant conception conflicts with his rejection of purely extrinsic denominations – i.e., properties not grounded in intrinsic (qualitative) features of a thing. Under the abundant view, existence could become a merely extrinsic or "Cambridge property" (i.e., one that entails no real or intrinsic change in the subject). This would offer a way to resolve the puzzle

13 Cf. Mates (1968), (1972), and (1986); Adams (1982), (1988a), and (1994).

14 My account is substantially based on Nelson (2020).

15 Discussing Leibniz's account of relations, Mates observes that Leibniz «would not be inclined to accept every open sentence with a free variable as expressing an attribute» (Mates 1968: 352). On this point, see also Ishiguro (1990: 123–126).

of existence, but only at the cost of stripping existence of its absoluteness and reality. Such a move, however, is highly counterintuitive¹⁶. First, the distinction between what exists and what is merely possible should not be merely relative. Secondly, one wants to say that actual existence corresponds to what is real in a thing: existence appears to be the precondition for the instantiation of any properties whatsoever (cf. the scholastic dictum *non entis nulla sunt attributa*). If, as Leibniz claims, not everything is actual, then it would be unacceptable to treat actual existence as neither real nor absolute.

This commits Leibniz to a sparse conception of properties, whereby a predicate denotes a property only if the objects to which it applies resemble one another intrinsically. The idea that existence must be grounded in a thing's nature – or, more precisely, in its degree of reality or perfection – stems from the conviction that existence cannot be a merely extrinsic denomination¹⁷.

Yet it is also undeniable that existence shares features of relational properties: the maximum of perfection can be determined only via comparison across possible worlds (each with its own degree of reality or perfection), and comparison inherently involves relationality. Moreover, the (partially) extrinsic character of existence is required to preserve the contingency of the actual world: if existence were just an intrinsic denomination of individuals (and worlds), the actualization of the most perfect would be an automatic process, and what exists would thus exist necessarily.

In Leibniz's terms, the possession of maximum perfection is a necessary but not sufficient condition for a world (or individual) to be actualized; God's decision to create the best is also required. Thus, Leibniz must reconcile the relational or extrinsic aspects of existence with its absoluteness. This reconciliation is achieved by appealing to God's moral necessity to create the best.

In what follows, I will thus frame the question of existence in terms of whether it should be seen as a property of individuals (a first-order property) or of concepts (a second-order property), where the former concerns property instantiation by individuals and the latter concerns the instantiation (or non-instantiation, in the case of non-existence) of concepts. The second view corresponds to what nowadays is commonly known as the Frege-Russell theory of existence¹⁸.

16 In contemporary metaphysics, this position has been notably defended by David Lewis with his relativization of the notion of actuality. Lewis's position, however, derives from a strong form of modal realism that Leibniz could not accept; see my discussion below, especially Chapter 7.

17 This is clear from what Leibniz says in a text tentatively dated to around 1700, i.e., that categories like quantity and position «do not constitute any intrinsic denomination per se, and so they are merely relations which demand a foundation derived from the category of quality, that is, from an intrinsic accidental denomination» (C 9/MP 134). On this point, see especially Curley (1976). Curley's paper represents a brilliant defence of Russell's original position (before his reading of Couturat).

18 Cf. Russell (1905) and also *The Philosophy of Logical Atomism*, part five: "General Propositions and Existence" (Russell 2009: 61–77). On Frege, see the discussion with Punjer, quoted in my

2.4. Descriptivism and the Limits of Conceptual Containment

The superessentialist account defended by Mates can be seen as a coherent defence of the view that existence must be considered a property of concepts – though not of general, but of individual concepts, i.e., complete individual concepts. The sense in which this account may be deemed “Russellian” lies in its application of a descriptivist framework – originally formulated by Russell in 1905 and subsequently refined – to Leibniz’s theory of complete concepts¹⁹.

The foundation of the superessentialist view is the combination of Leibniz’s theory of complete individual concepts with a *modal* characterization of essential properties. Given an individual *a* and a property *φ*, *φ* is essential to *a* if *a* cannot cease to instantiate *φ* while continuing to exist – that is, it is impossible for *a* to exist without being *φ*. This modal notion is readily interpreted in terms of possible worlds: there are no possible worlds in which *a* exists and is not *φ*. Since all of an individual’s properties are derivable from its complete concept – and the complete concept is taken to express the individual essence – all properties of an individual are thereby considered essential²⁰.

This conclusion, however, depends on the acceptance of a seemingly counterintuitive thesis concerning individuation – namely, that each individual is individuated by all of its properties. (The more problematic aspect here concerns relational properties: whether they, too, must be included in the complete notion or not)²¹. Leibniz’s theory of complete concepts can nevertheless be interpreted precisely as an expression of this strong theory of individuation. What I am concerned with here, however, are only the modal consequences of this view: since individuals exist in one and only one possible world, and all their properties are essential, it follows that all of an individual’s properties – more precisely, all its first-level properties – are necessary²².

Conclusions below.

19 As Leibniz famously writes in the *Discourse on Metaphysics* (1686): «the nature of an individual substance or of a complete being is to have a notion so complete that it is sufficient to contain and to allow us to deduce from it all the predicates of the subject to which this notion is attributed» (A VI 4: 1540/ AG 41). On the development of this account, see especially Fichant (2004) and Di Bella (2005a).

20 This can be concluded from what Leibniz says in a text to Arnauld, 14 July 1686, see A II 2: 76 (or GP II 53): «[...] if, in the life of any person, and even in the whole universe, anything went differently from what it has, nothing would prevent us from saying that it was another person or another possible universe that God has chosen. It would then indeed be another individual» (LA 59–60); see also A II 2: 49 (or GP II 42), especially the example of the marble block.

21 On this topic, see especially Mugnai (1992) and (2012).

22 This view has been clearly summarized by Nicholas Rescher, who, criticizing Adams, concludes that «there are no contingent truths about possibles as such [...]. Relationships among possibilities do and must play out in the thought of God *sub ratione possibilitatis* independently of (and so, figuratively speaking, antecedently to) his creation choice» (Rescher 2002; republished in Rescher 2013: 91 fn34). The same idea – that the independence of possibles from

As in Russell's original view, the necessity of truths concerning merely possible entities is paired with the idea that *actual* existence is the only contingent feature an individual can possess. Therefore, actual existence must be excluded from the set of properties contained in the complete notion. This implies a limitation on the theory of conceptual containment. Mates's reading of Leibniz aligns precisely with this view. According to Mates, the principle of predicate-in-subject containment functions as a definition of truth – serving as both necessary and sufficient – only in the case of essential propositions. In the case of existential propositions (where quantification is restricted to what actually exists), Mates notes that «Leibniz clearly does not regard the inclusion of the predicate in subject as a sufficient, nor perhaps even as a necessary, condition of truth». For singular existential propositions in particular, predicate containment functions only as a necessary – but not sufficient – condition for truth²³.

2.5. Species and Individuals: A Neglected Russellian Remark

One notable aspect of Mates's interpretation is his attribution of the claim that conceptual containment suffices for all truths to a confusion between «containment in the general concept itself» and «containment in the individual concept of every existent individual falling under the general concept» (Mates 1986: 94). One might characterize this as a confusion between set inclusion ($A \subset B$) and set membership ($x \in A$) respectively. According to Mates, this conflation ultimately reduces to a more general confusion between *inherence* and *predication*. This becomes apparent when a proposition such as “ A is B ” (which for Leibniz means “Every A is B ”) is interpreted ambiguously – either as stating that the subject, which is A , is also B , or that everything which is A is also B – without clearly distinguishing the concept of the individual from the individual itself.

Interestingly, this critique also reflects a line of thought already suggested by Russell. Russell noted that subject–predicate propositions involve two distinct types of relations: that between genera and species, and that between species and individuals. He illustrated this distinction with examples: “Red is a colour” represents a genera-species relation, while “This is red” exemplifies a species-individual relation. In considering the doctrine of conceptual containment, Russell argued that it applies to propositions of the genera-species type, such as “Red is a colour”, rather than to propositions like “This is red” or “Socrates is human.” For Russell, this is why every proposition concerning actual individuals is contingent, i.e., synthetic.

God's will is the same as the claim that all truths about possibles are necessary – has been defended by Mates, Mondadori, Curley, and Blumenfeld among others.

23 Mates (1986: 86–87). The distinction between the essential and the existential reading of propositions has also been emphasized by Ishiguro (1990: 183–187).

This observation raises a difficulty for essential propositions concerning merely possible, non-actual individuals. If, as Russell maintains, «analytic propositions are necessarily concerned with essences and species, not as with assertions as to individuals» (Russell 1992: 20), then the distinction between an individual and its properties – so crucial at the level of actuality – collapses entirely at the level of the merely possible.

At this point, Russell adds two further remarks. First, if reference to individuals is essential for establishing a subject–predicate distinction, then the subject must be understood as «any individual having a certain collection of predicates». Consequently, propositions of the genera-species kind must be reducible to those of the species-individual kind by transforming the former into hypothetical propositions. This, in fact, is a strategy that Leibniz recommends in a well-known passage from the *New Essays*²⁴. According to Russell, however, this reduction is unsuccessful because Leibniz assumes that hypothetical truths carry no existential import. For Leibniz, «the truth of hypothetical propositions lies in the connection of ideas» – that is, in conceptual containment²⁵.

Secondly, Russell highlights a tension within Leibniz’s system between two directions of philosophical reasoning: one that proceeds from essences to individuals, and another that moves from individuals to predicates and essences. In the case of eternal truths, the point of departure is essences and their mutual relations. In the case of contingent truths, by contrast, the starting point is the individual as it exists, along with the relations it bears to other individuals. In what follows, I will show that these two strands in Leibniz’s thought correspond to two distinct philosophical traditions: one related to classical essentialism, the other to the nominalist tradition – or, at least, to Leibniz’s own interpretation thereof. The point at which these perspectives converge is at the notion of *possible individuals* – a problematic concept, since a possible individual must share many of the properties which would normally be considered as existence-entailing (such as relations, spatiotemporal location, and causal connection), yet lack actuality, given the necessity of admitting unactualized possibilities.

2.6. The Root of Contingency: Existence or Infinity?

A similar opposition appears in the debate over the nature of existence: between those who adopt the Russellian view that the extra-propositional character of existence undermines the idea that contingent truths can be grounded in conceptual containment, and those who uphold the universal validity of conceptual containment and attempt to integrate existence within the conceptual

24 Cf. *New Essays*, IV, xi, §13, A VI 6: 447; see Chapter 9 below.

25 Russell (1992: 18). Cf. also §21, where he states that the kind of subject-predicate propositions appropriate to contingent truths is that which says “This is a man”, not “Man is rational” (Russell 1992: 49).

and propositional framework – typically, by appealing to the doctrine of infinite analysis²⁶.

Mates clearly falls into the former camp. He emphasizes the link between contingent propositions and actual existence, concluding that contingent truths are existential truths, and that existential truths are grounded in the properties of actual individuals. In his possible-worlds interpretation of Leibnizian propositions, Mates explicitly writes: «it is evident that “exists” means “exists in the actual world” (or, more precisely, “falls under the complete individual concept belonging to the possible world that has been actualized”») (Mates 1986: 94).

Thus, actual existence is understood in terms of the instantiation of a complete individual concept. This leads Mates to adopt the Russellian view that the root of contingency lies not in the infinite complexity of individual concepts, but rather in the fact of their actual instantiation – or lack thereof²⁷. Mates concludes that no existential proposition is true in a possible world unless the concept of its subject is instantiated in that world. This conclusion, however, yields two counterintuitive implications: (a) there are no false contingent propositions about complete concepts – their negations are necessarily true, which implies that all truths about merely possible individuals are necessary; and (b) propositions such as “Caesar is a human being” and “Caesar is white” are equally contingent, once both are understood as existentially loaded.

In response to Mates, Robert Adams argues that his interpretation «rests heavily on the assumption that a proposition is contingent, for Leibniz, if and only if it is true of some possible world and false of others». Yet, as Adams notes, «there are [...] very few texts of Leibniz that explicitly support this assumption». (Adams 1988a: 302) This is one reason why Adams favours the view that the root of contingency lies in the infinite – specifically, in the theory of infinite analysis – rather than in actual existence²⁸. The other reason, of course,

26 The bibliography on Leibniz’s account of existence is quite rich. In addition to the texts quoted above, see at least the following: Jalabert (1968); Curley (1976); Skosnik (1980); Adams (1994: 157–176); Wiehart (1996); Wilkins (2006); Jeangène Vilmer (2006) and (2007); Look (2011); Nachtomy (2012); Merlo (2012); Paolini Paoletti (2013); Bardout (2025: 259–375).

27 Cf. Mates (1986: 114). Here he mentions the fact that there are passages (most notably §71 of the *Generales Inquisitiones*), where Leibniz explicitly states that an existential proposition “*A* is *B*” can be transformed into “*AB* is an existent”, where existence works as a predicate. See Mates (1986: 100–101), where he takes the idea of existence as a predicate to be incompatible with the claim (defended in the passage of the *Theodicy* quoted above) that the concept of an individual is not changed by God’s actualization of that individual.

28 The thesis that the root of contingency has to be located in the infinite is defended by Leibniz in a couple of papers written at the end of 1689; see, in particular, A VI 4: 1661: «Hence it is clear that the root of contingency is the infinity of reasons (*Ex his apparet radicem contingentiae esse infinitum in rationibus*)», and A VI 4: 1663: «there are contingent truths, in whose explanation the progression of reasons is infinite». On infinite analysis, see also *Generales Inquisitiones* §74 (A VI 4: 763/GI 87). For a detailed discussion of infinite analysis, see at least Schneider (1974: 291ff), Mates (1986: 108–114), Carriero (1993) and (1995).

is that this alternative allows one to preserve the universal applicability of the conceptual containment theory of truth.

Adams, therefore, categorically rejects the idea that existence constitutes a genuine exception to the predicate-in-subject principle²⁹. In this respect, he aligns with a number of scholars who seek to weaken the superessentialist reading of Leibniz. Although these views very much vary from one another, they all share a common point: the rejection of the idea discussed above – namely, that there is no contingency within the realm of the merely possible³⁰.

3. The Standard Reading

As the preceding discussion suggests, Mates holds that existence should be regarded as a property of concepts rather than of individuals. However, due to Leibniz's nominalism, this property applies only to individual concepts. Positive existential statements (e.g., "Alexander the Great exists") are thus interpreted as asserting that a certain individual concept is instantiated. Conversely, negative existential statements (e.g., "Pegasus does not exist") assert that the corresponding individual concept fails to be instantiated. One complication with this view is that it appears to commit Leibniz to a descriptivist theory of proper names, since proper names, strictly speaking, stand for *complete individual concepts*³¹.

3.1. Existence as Exemplification

Russell's descriptivist theory was based on the idea that the grammatical subject-predicate structure of a sentence does not reflect its true logical form. Instead, genuine logical form is to be understood in terms of quantification – both universal and existential. In this framework, attributing first-order properties to classes of individuals transforms categorical statements into conditional ones. Existential statements, in turn, are expressed using the existential quantifier. Here, the referential function of the subject (in the original subject-predicate form) disappears, as the logical subject is treated as a predicate – a property said to be instantiated³². The key insight is that, in the proper logical form of an ex-

29 Cf. Adams (1994: 42–46), where he weakens the relevance of these passages where Leibniz explicitly treats "essential" and "existential" (referred to properties) as equivalent, respectively, to "necessary" and "contingent". Cf. also Adams (1994: 63–65).

30 See, for instance, Sleight (1990); Cover–O'Leary Hawthorne (1999). Di Bella has emphasized the relevance of Leibniz's strategy based on possible decrees; see Di Bella (2005a: 265–300). The connection between contingency and actuality has been questioned by Heinekamp (1969: 133ff.) among others; see also Vailati (1986).

31 On Leibniz's theory of proper names, see Mondadori (1971) and (1973). (The 1971 paper, written in Italian, contains a detailed comparison of Leibniz's theory of complete concepts with the main contemporary theories of proper names, such as those of Russell, Kripke, Strawson, and Searle).

32 Russell's descriptivist theory in "On Denoting" (Russell 1905a) has to be read together with what he says in his "Knowledge by Acquaintance and Knowledge by Description" (Russell 1910–11).

istential proposition, the subject is not a name for an individual but a term for a property (or, in Russell's original terminology, a *propositional function*)³³.

Leaving aside the formal details of the Fregean or Russellian account of quantification, the philosophical ideas underlying them were not entirely foreign to someone like Leibniz. We have already seen that Leibniz typically addressed the lack of existential import in universal propositions by interpreting them conditionally. The notion, moreover, that existence lies outside the structure of the proposition – what one might call the “extra-propositional” nature of existence – was already present in thinkers such as Hobbes, a significant influence on Leibniz's early philosophy (see below, especially Chapter 3). One of the main findings that will emerge from my reconstruction in this book is that these elements – the conditional reading of universal (or at least essential) propositions and the externality of existence to the propositional tie – play a much more prominent role in Leibniz's early philosophy, prior to his development of the theory of conceptual containment and complete concepts. In my view, this suggests that Leibniz's position on the interplay between modality, ontology, and predication evolved significantly over time.

That said, one might still treat a complete individual concept as an infinitely detailed, exhaustive definite description. Following Russell's or Quine's approach to paraphrasing proper names, singular existential propositions can in this way be understood as special cases of general existential propositions (e.g., “Cats exist”), where the idea of existence as concept-instantiation appears more intuitive. One well-known objection to reducing existence to the existential quantifier is that, while this seems satisfactory in statements like “Cats exist” (“There exists at least one thing such that it is a cat”), it becomes more controversial with singular propositions such as “Socrates exists”. This would have to be rendered as “There is something such that it is Socrates” (or such that it “Socratizes”), where “being Socrates” is treated as a predicate. While this move might seem strained, it gains plausibility within the framework of complete concepts: “Socrates exists” would then mean that there exists an individual instantiating the complete concept of Socrates³⁴.

There, he explains that what he calls logically proper names (i.e., genuine directly referring expressions) are only certain demonstratives and pure indexicals. The example of “this” in a proposition like “This is red” cannot but remind us of the distinction, in the book on Leibniz, between two different types of subject-object relationships. In the case of Russellian proper names, however, the descriptive content is null, for the subject is just a pure “this”, and not a *tode ti* (a “this” of a certain kind), which also explains why he restricted the category of proper names (or logically proper names) to those cases in which something like Cartesian certainty is achievable.

33 Cf. especially the discussion in Russell (2009: 66–69 and 85–92).

34 According to Leibniz, only God has access to the complete concept of an individual, while a limited understanding needs to fix the reference of a proper name in a completely different way, one which is composed by a mix of both descriptive and ostensive procedures. Cf. *Generales Inquisitiones* (1686): «A particular individual, however, is *this* one, whom I designate

3.2. The Problem of Actuality

The main challenge facing the descriptivist interpretation concerns the very notion of “instantiation” (or “exemplification”) of a concept. From an explanatory standpoint, it appears that the notion of instantiation presupposes existence, rather than grounding it – at least if we are concerned with existence in the actual world³⁵. In the context of Leibniz’s account of complete concepts, this issue can be obscured by saying that an individual exists if its corresponding complete concept is instantiated in the actual world. But this merely shifts the burden to defining what it means for a world to be “actual”. The original problem re-emerges: What, exactly, makes a world actual, especially if God cannot alter anything in the transition from possibility to actuality?

On this issue – how to define “existence” – Leibniz appears not to offer a definitive answer. At times, he suggests that existence, from a human perspective, must be tied to what is “given” to us in experience, making it impossible to provide a full explanatory definition. From a metaphysical standpoint, however (in contrast to a phenomenological one), he sometimes proposes that a partial *a priori* account of existence can be offered, grounded in the notion of *perfection*³⁶.

This allows one to make sense of the distinction between the actual world and those that are merely possible – provided one accepts the principle that the actual world is the best of all possible worlds, i.e., the one that realizes the greatest degree of perfection, and that God is morally necessitated to choose it³⁷. A simple solution to the original question, then, is this: the actual world is a *world*, while a merely possible world is only the *concept* of a world – just as an actual individual is a *thing*, whereas a merely possible individual is the *concept* of a thing. In both cases, the term “actual” might seem redundant. For the sake of clarity, I should emphasize that I take this to be Leibniz’s considered view. However, to fully appreciate it, some further elements must be added to the whole picture.

either by pointing out or by adding some distinguishing signs. For, although it is impossible that there are marks which distinguish it perfectly from any other possible individual, there are however marks such that distinguish it from other individuals that we meet» (A VI 4: 744/GI 53); see also *New Essays* III, iii, §6, A VI 6: 289–290, where Leibniz states that individuality involves the infinite and, therefore, we cannot have an adequate knowledge of it.

35 Cf. McGinn (2000: 21).

36 The contrast between the *a posteriori* and *a priori* account of existence is discussed in Chapter 4. *A priori* and *a posteriori* have to be taken in their Scholastic, pre-Kantian sense here: an *a priori* proof (or *propter quid*) is one that proceeds from the cause to the effect; an *a posteriori* one (or *quia*) goes from the effect to the cause. Cf. Adams (1994: 109–110), and my discussion in Chapter 5.

37 On this sense of necessity, cf. A VI 2: 495: «Whatever is required for a good is necessary – that is, whatever, if absent, takes the good away (*Necessarium est quicquid boni requisitum est, seu quod non posito tollitur bonum*)»; see Adams (2005); cf. see also my discussion in Chapters 7 and 8 below.

4. The Evolution of Leibniz's Views on Existence

4.1. The Young Leibniz on Existence

Up to this point, I have emphasized the contrast between two interpretive paradigms concerning Leibniz's view of existence. Crucially, the tension between these paradigms should not be seen as external to Leibniz's thought but as internal to its very development. The guiding premise of this work is that this tension must not be diminished – through selective textual interpretation or other strategies often employed in the scholarship – but rather brought to the fore, as it helps to explain why Leibniz never succeeded in offering a fully unified or unambiguous account of existence in his mature writings.

One of the central claims I advance is that Leibniz's well-known modal metaphysics – his theory of possible worlds – is the result of philosophical developments that began during the final years of his stay in Paris and continued into his early years in Hanover. Within this framework, existence is primarily understood in terms of actuality – that which distinguishes the actual world from those that are merely possible. Leibniz's reflections on existence, however, predate his formulation of the theory of possible worlds. They can be traced back to earlier phenomenological investigations related to his project of a "philosophy of mind", undertaken during his Mainz period (particularly in the years 1670–1672).

In these early writings, existence is characterized almost exclusively in terms of "distinct perceivability" – that is, as what can be perceived without contradiction and in accordance with the regular order of phenomena³⁸. Here, regularity serves as the distinguishing mark of the reality ascribed to these phenomena. Notably, this phenomenological approach to existence remains present throughout Leibniz's later writings. My broader thesis, then, is that the development of Leibniz's metaphysics is rather complex: he retains several foundational insights from his early work, even as he attempts to integrate them into newer philosophical frameworks – such as his modal metaphysics – which were not the original context in which those ideas were originally developed. This integration does not result in outright contradiction, but it does reveal that there is no simple, pre-established harmony (pun intended!) between Leibniz's phenomenology and his metaphysics of existence, nor between his ontological and modal reflections.

38 In his criticism of Russell, Heinekamp has correctly remarked that the thesis of the synthetic (i.e., empirical) character of existential propositions can be correctly ascribed only to the writings of Leibniz's earlier period. Cf. Heinekamp (1969: 140, esp. fn46).

4.2. Phenomenology, Ontology, and Modality

In a short draft entitled *Genera terminorum* (ca. 1683–1685), Leibniz lists several fundamental categories or conceptual oppositions that help map the structure of reality. Among them are:

Aliquid. Nihil [Something/Nothing]
Possibile. Impossibile [Possible/Impossible]
Necessarium. Contingens [Necessary/Contingent]
Ens actu. Ens potentia [Actual being/Potential being]
Ens reale. Ens apparens, ut iris [Real being/Apparent being, like the rainbow]
Substantia. Accidens [Substance/Accident]
Individuum. Universale [Individual/Universal]
 [...]

Ens incompletum. Ens completum [Incomplete being/Complete being]. (A VI 4: 566–567)³⁹

I will focus on the oppositions presented in line (4), *Being in potency vs. Being in act*; line (5) *Real Being vs. Apparent Being*; and lines (6), (7) as well as the last line (8), i.e., respectively, *Substance vs. Accident*, *Individual vs. Universal*, and *Complete vs. Incomplete*. The latter (6–8) can be grouped together under the heading of the contrast between the concrete and the abstract, whereas the first and the second correspond, respectively, to the contrast between the possible and the actual, and the real and the imaginary. Generally speaking, these pairs can be grouped under three main conceptual dichotomies: (a) actual vs. possible, (b) real vs. imaginary, and (c) concrete vs. abstract.

I argue that the concept of existence plays a central role across three levels of Leibniz's thought: the *phenomenological*, the *ontological*, and the *modal level*. At each level, a foundational binary opposition emerges in which "existence" occupies the first position. On the phenomenological level, the key opposition is between the *real* and the *imaginary*; on the ontological level, between the *concrete* and the *abstract*; and on the modal level, between the *actual* and the *possible*. In each case, what exists is real, concrete, and actual. These characterizations, however, do not perfectly coincide, nor are they coextensive.

This becomes clear when we consider that the concrete/abstract distinction appears sufficient to define what exists in the actual world. According to Leibniz's nominalism, only concrete individuals inhabit the actual world. Should we therefore regard merely possible entities as abstract? This might be true for

39 This list is related to Leibniz's tables of definitions, in which Leibniz pursues a sort of categorical-ontological analysis, starting with a most general concept or category, which stands for the highest genus, then dividing it into further sub-categories, repeating the process of division and subdivision until reaching some determinate specific concepts. As far as categorical analysis is concerned, see especially Schepers (1968), Rutherford (1995: 99ff), Di Bella (2005a: 155ff).

entities like space, time, geometrical figures, or species, whose “reality” can only be preserved by relocating them from actuality to possibility. But when we turn to *possible individuals* (i.e., complete individual concepts), the parallel between the ontological and modal levels begins to break down. Are these concepts concrete or abstract?

From the standpoint of actuality, possible individuals are abstract, for only actual entities count as true individuals – this is the thrust of what I call *Leibnizian actualism*⁴⁰. Yet from an ontological point of view, possible individuals cannot be equated with purely abstract entities like mathematical objects or geometrical forms. Unlike the latter, complete individual concepts involve properties that typically imply existence – for example, when we consider a possible world as an ordered system of possible individuals, structured by spatiotemporal and causal relations. As I will argue in Chapter 9, possible individuals must be distinguished from mere possibilities. The former are *contingently non-actual* – they could exist, or have existed, even if some of them will never exist – while the latter are *necessarily non-actual*, incapable of ever existing. This distinction raises an important question: how is such a mismatch between the modal and ontological domains even possible?

My suggestion is that it reflects the complex historical development of Leibniz’s thought. In his early philosophy, Leibniz had already formed a well-developed nominalist ontology, but his modal theory remained rudimentary. He tacitly assumed a correspondence between the abstract/concrete and possible/actual dichotomies. As a result, he did not yet recognize possible individuals or possible worlds as entities with any proper ontological status. At this stage, possibilities (both general and individual ones) were treated as mere *entia rationis* or *imaginary entities*. At this early stage of his thought, his reflections on existence are mainly focused on the distinction between the real and the imaginary, i.e., on the ways of distinguishing real phenomena from imaginary ones.

This phenomenological approach in Leibniz’s early reflections on existence is consistent with his claim in the *Dissertatio de Arte Combinatoria* (1666) that contingent propositions are existential in nature and therefore fall outside the domain of combinatorial art, which is concerned only with “theorems”, i.e., analytic propositions⁴¹. Here, existence is presupposed in acts of predication and ultimately grounded in sensory experience – an experience that cannot yield metaphysical certainty, since it is vulnerable to sceptical challenges like the “dream

40 Leibnizian actualism is modelled on what is sometimes called “Russellian actualism”, i.e., the claim that there are no objects that do not exist, or, alternatively, that whatever exists is actual. Actuality, in Leibniz’s sense, involves whatever exists in present, past, and future, therefore Leibnizian actualism is not a form of presentism (the view that only the present is actual). See Menzel (2020). Cf. also Adams (2021, Ch. 1).

41 On this point, I am heavily indebted to the analysis of Di Bella (2005a: 33–44), who stresses the importance of a “particularist ontology” in Leibniz’s early works.

argument”. I cannot demonstrate that Socrates exists, I can only perceive it, but perception is fallible (it can be just a dream, a hallucination, etc.). The framework of Leibniz’s first reflections on existence is the phenomenological one, concerning the determination of those criteria which allow us (pragmatically) to distinguish *real* phenomena from imaginary ones⁴².

This implies that, for the early Leibniz, “concrete” and “actual” were coextensive notions. Anything that failed to be actual was relegated to the realm of the imaginary, with no ontological status. Possibility was an epistemic matter – what could be conceived clearly and distinctly – not a metaphysical one. The main criteria of possibility and impossibility are epistemic ones (clear and distinct conceivability); nothing corresponds to these notions on the ontological level – in particular, there is no attempt to draw a distinction between real and nominal definitions. This perspective aligns with the strong nominalism Leibniz defended in his earliest writings, such as the 1663 disputation on the principle of individuation (see Chapter 1).

This view began to change between the end of his Paris stay and Leibniz’s arrival in Hanover in the late 1670s. If my reconstruction is correct, Leibniz’s primary reason for introducing the notion of possible worlds was theological: to counter necessitarian views held by thinkers like Hobbes and Spinoza, particularly the claim that the existence of the world follows necessarily from God’s nature. Notably, Leibniz himself still upheld this necessitarian view in his *Confessio Philosophi* (1672–73)⁴³.

The mature theory of possible worlds emerges as a synthesis of theological and cosmological perspectives developed during the 1670s. These two strands are discussed in detail in Chapters 6 and 7. The resulting challenge for Leibniz was to reconcile this new framework with his particularist ontology. In both the *Confessio* and his later writings, the idea of the world as a unified, ordered series of entities (*series rerum*) becomes a key entry point to the concept of actuality. Possible worlds are conceived as divine ideas – conceptual models within the mind of God. Leibniz’s rejection of a plurality of actual worlds (discussed in late 1676) reinforces, moreover, the actualist claim that there is, in the strictest sense, only *one* kind of world: the actual one. The challenge, then, is to reconcile the newly attributed ontological status of merely possible things – worlds and individuals alike – with the absolute nature and the primacy of the actual.

42 In this sense, “real” can be deemed to work as an “excluder predicate”, i.e., a predicate which ascribes nothing positive to an individual *a*, but simply excludes *a* from the domain of purely imaginary or fictional entities. Cf. Hall (1959). In Leibniz’s phenomenological characterization of existence, there is something more than just this, however – namely, there is the connection between existence and causality, and the characterization of what exists as being causally connected with “me” (as a kind of Cartesian subject) by means of a causal chain; see Chapter 5 below.

43 Leibniz’s problematic necessitarianism in the *Confessio* is discussed at length in Rateau (2019: 54–87). Cf. Chapter 6 below.

4.3. The Complete Concept: Individual Essence and/or Ontological Subject?

The same problem can also be approached from a different angle. As I show in Chapter 3, Leibniz's early reflections on the concrete-abstract distinction and the theory of predication focus primarily on the individual substance as an *ontological subject* – that is, as the subject of inhesion according to the traditional ontology. By contrast, his theological and theodicean reflections emphasize the notion of an *individual essence*: basically, the complete determination of an individual prior to the creation of the world. This complete determination reflects the thoroughgoing interconnectedness of the world as a *series rerum*, and serves as Leibniz's principal argument for justifying the presence of evil and imperfection in the world: evil stems from the imperfection inherent in created things, and such imperfection pertains essentially to the nature of these things, which are independent of God's will.

The theory of complete concepts, can thus be seen as Leibniz's attempt to unify these two perspectives: the theory of the ontological subject and that of individual essence. The main difficulty lies in the fact that the ontological subject theory underscores the distinction between individual and general properties, whereas the theory of individual essence appears to blur the boundary between essential and accidental properties – both of which are unalterable by God and equally contemplated by him prior to creation. This problem becomes pressing only once one accepts that the status of ontological subjects (and the concrete/abstract distinction) extends beyond the actual to the merely possible. Yet this, arguably, is precisely the situation Leibniz must address in his mature philosophy.

One possible solution is to downplay the notion of the ontological subject, thereby adopting a purely descriptivist view of possible worlds: a complete concept is not the counterpart of an ontological subject but rather a set of (general) predicates. While this aligns with a combinatorial view of possible worlds, it fails to capture the essential distinction between species and individuals. An alternative solution is to transpose the theory of ontological subjects to the realm of merely possible worlds: in this view, a complete concept is not merely a bundle of general predicates, but something akin to a *haecceity* – something that can only be intuited, even by God, because it involves the infinite. From this concept, everything that would happen to that individual can be deduced or “read off” by an infinitely powerful mind⁴⁴. The challenge with this approach, however, is that it appears to conflict with Leibniz's strong actualism – endangering the distinction between concepts and objects, properties and individuals⁴⁵.

44 A clear passage, in this sense, is in the *Discourse on Metaphysics* §8: «God, seeing Alexander's individual notion or haecceity, sees in it at the same time the *basis and reason* for all the predicates which can be said truly of him» (A VI 4: 1540–1541/AG 41, italics mine).

45 In a private conversation, Philipp Blum suggested that the relation of priority between an individual substance *a* and its complete notion *C(a)* is twofold: from the ontological point of

5. Making Sense of Existence: Ontology or Modality?

The distinction among three levels of analysis – especially between the ontological and the modal – proves particularly valuable at this point, not only historically but also interpretatively. It helps in clarifying Leibniz’s implicit distinction between *existence* as relative to a possible world and *existence* as actuality, i.e., something absolute. Possible existence is intelligible from an ontological standpoint, but not from a modal one. When “existence” is understood modally – that is, as “actuality” – there is no domain of merely possible objects.

Regardless of whether we are speaking of the actual world or a merely possible one, the very concept of a world requires that it be composed primarily of concrete rather than abstract entities (speaking *modo formali*: complete concepts). The main difference between these two kinds of entities is that abstract entities are necessarily non-actual, while concrete entities (complete concepts) are contingently non-actual. An individual existing in a suboptimal possible world will never be actualized; yet, in some sense, it *could* have been – had God willed it otherwise⁴⁶.

From the modal point of view, however, Leibniz’s remarks about possible individuals must be reformulated counterfactually. Strictly speaking, a merely possible individual is not an *individual* at all: it possesses no properties. But it *would be* (or *would have been*) an individual – it *would display* (or *would have displayed*) all the properties contained in its concept – if it were to be actualized. This counterfactual formulation preserves the restriction of existence ascriptions to the domain of the actual.

5.1. The Double Account of the Copula and the Double Account of Possibility

Leibniz addresses the dual sense of existence through two distinct strategies. Unsurprisingly, the first is grounded in logical-ontological considerations, while the second pertains to his modal theory. The first strategy – extensively discussed by scholars like Mates and Adams – involves a dual reading of the copula, resulting in a distinction between *essential* and *existential* propositions.

view, $C(a)$ is prior to a in the sense that God creates a by actualizing $C(a)$; from the metaphysical point of view, however, a is prior to $C(a)$ in the sense that a grounds the unity of marks that together constitute $C(a)$ (what Leibniz sometimes call the “haecceity” of a). If I understand him well, Blum’s distinction between metaphysical and ontological priority is (at least partially) similar to that between the modal and the ontological approach I defend here (and, also, with that between the complete concept as an individual essence and as an ontological subject as well).

46 From the ontological point of view, one might say that individuals (or complete individual concepts) are *essentially* complete; when the contrast holds between a genuine individual and a fictional one. A typical feature of fictional objects, indeed, is to be essentially incomplete, since they lack determinations in many of their qualitative features.

This distinction corresponds to the non-temporal vs. temporal reading of the copula. Leibniz also pairs this with a traditional distinction: that between *propositiones de secundo* and *de tertio adjacente* – propositions of the form “*AB* is” and “*A* is *B*”, respectively. Traditionally, *de secundo adjacente* propositions were associated with existential readings of the copula, and *de tertio adjacente* with predicative readings. Leibniz, however, challenges this, suggesting that both kinds of propositions may admit both essential and existential interpretations⁴⁷.

The second strategy is more unconventional – it is Leibniz’s (in)famous theory of *striving possibles* (or *existurientia*): the idea that possibles possess an inherent tendency toward existence, proportional to their degree of reality or perfection. As I will argue at a later stage in this book (see Chapter 9 below), Leibniz uses this strategy to implicitly introduce a double account of possibility: a purely logical, or pre-existential one, and a sort of existential notion of possibility captured by the idea of the tendency toward existence (or *existurientia*). This theory, first criticized by Russell, risks collapsing into necessitarianism if taken literally – thereby conflicting with God’s freedom in creation⁴⁸. For this reason, most commentators treat *existurientia* metaphorically. Leibniz himself hints at this interpretation, emphasizing that the conflict among possibles is not a real one among objects (which do not exist), but an *ideal* conflict among competing reasons within the divine intellect (or, to be more precise, between God’s antecedent and consequent will)⁴⁹.

5.2. A Contemporary Approach: Encoding vs. Exemplification

Leibniz’s twofold approach – distinguishing between two senses of the copula and between a logical and an existential reading of possibility – can be recast in more contemporary terms using conceptual tools that, while unavailable to him, were not entirely alien to the traditional thought Leibniz might have access to. First, the distinction between *attributive* and *predicative* readings of possibility helps in clarifying the ambiguous notion of “possible existence”: in the phrase “possible individual”, the term *possible* is an attribute that modifies *individual* in a way that, as traditional logicians noted, *alienates* its original meaning – since a possible individual is not truly an individual, but only a concept.

Secondly, we can apply Edward Zalta’s distinction between *encoding* and *exemplification* of properties, originally introduced to formalize a Meinongian theory of objects⁵⁰. This framework offers a useful resolution to Leibniz’s version of

47 Mates (1986: 97–104), and Adams (1994: 30–46).

48 Cf. Russell (1992: xv–xvi). This comes from the Preface to the 1937 edition of his book.

49 Cf. Poser (1969: 61–66). On Leibniz’s resorting to the Scholastic distinction between antecedent and consequent will, see Rateau (2019: 216–232).

50 Cf. Zalta (1983: 32–39), and concerning the problem of existence, Zalta (1983: 50–52) and (1988: 15–32). The main difference with the Leibnizian framework, however, is that for Zalta “existence” is a sort of logical property which no thing can fail to have, i.e., everything which

the puzzle of existence (see Chapter 10 below for the details). A merely possible individual (e.g., Adam before creation) is an entity (*Ens*) that *encodes* all the properties of the actual Adam (being the first man, living in the Garden of Eden, etc.), while *exemplifying* only properties such as being a complete concept or being eternally contemplated by God, etc. Conversely, the actual Adam *exemplifies* all his existence-entailing properties but *encodes* none. This allows us to explain Leibniz's dual reading of the copula in terms of the difference between the *is* of exemplification and the *is* of encoding. Thus, the complete concept of a non-actual individual *is* (exemplifies) an abstract object and *is* (encodes) a concrete one, and so on. This entire framework, after all, can be viewed as a refinement of the traditional distinctions: especially the temporal vs. non-temporal readings of the copula, and the opposition *actus signatus* vs. *actus exercitus* (or formal vs. material modes of speech).

Zalta characterizes the relationship between the concept of Adam and Adam himself in terms of blueprint and instantiation: the concept *encodes* all and only those properties which the actual Adam *exemplifies*, even though the two are not identical. Adam is a spatiotemporal individual situated within the actual world – he *exists*. The concept of Adam, by contrast, imitates his properties by encoding them but exemplifies none, since it does not exist. In this way, the absolute distinction between the actual and the possible is maintained, while the notion of “possible existence” (i.e., existence-entailing properties of non-actual individuals) becomes intelligible through the concept of encoding.

6. Essences and Possible Worlds: A Problematic Synthesis

In what sense, then, could the distinction between the ontological and modal levels of analysis regarding the notion of “existence” help mitigate the opposition between the superessentialist (or Russellian) reading and its anti-Russellian counterpart?

exists in the actual world necessarily exists, whereas not everything which exists is necessarily concrete. What the common view would regard as a mere possible but non-existing (non-actual) thing, then, is properly to be understood as an existing but not concrete thing. This interpretation is incompatible with Leibniz's creationist metaphysics, however, and this is the reason why I have re-interpreted Zalta's distinction by restricting existence to actuality; cf. my discussion in Chapter 10 below. Notice, however, that, by resorting to his double reading of the copula, and the distinction between *Ens* and *Existens*, Leibniz justifies the possibility of quantifying over a domain of merely possible but non-existing entities. I think, however, that from the metaphysical point of view, the actualist point of view (according to which there are no existing things which are not actual, where, of course, God is included among the actual things) is the prominent one.

6.1. Superessentialism and Theodicy

Leibniz's paradigmatic superessentialist argument – that we cannot ask what Peter would have done under different circumstances because he would not be the same Peter – appears predominantly in contexts related to the problem of theodicy. This argument, in fact, follows from Leibniz's holistic account of the *series rerum*, which is intimately linked to his effort to absolve God from the charge of having voluntarily created evil.

The contingent reading of predication (which allows for a distinction between necessary and contingent properties *within* the complete concept) arises, by contrast, from Leibniz's analysis of predication that can be traced back to the *De Arte Combinatoria*, where the domain of ontological subjects – that is, what pertains to the individual *qua* individual – is distinguished from what pertains to an individual *qua* member of a species. This distinction can also be framed in terms of “essential” versus “accidental” properties, where the essential/accidental distinction is ontological rather than modal in nature.

Leibniz defends the superessentialist account when he wants to emphasize that a possible world is a “series of things” to be taken as an interconnected whole, such that even the slightest alteration changes its essence or “numerical individuality” (as stated in §9 of the *Theodicy*)⁵¹. From this perspective, both essential and accidental truths are treated on a par: they are the objects of God's knowledge of the possible, by contrast with actual existence, which is the object of God's knowledge of vision. The former is necessary (pre-volitional), while the latter is contingent (post-volitional).

The more nuanced account – emphasized in passages where Leibniz discusses *scientia media* – is explicitly meant to accommodate contingent possibilities. Yet, this account seems to contradict the superessentialist one. Nevertheless, Leibniz's acknowledgment of contingent possibles aligns him with those who uphold the irreducibility of middle knowledge to either knowledge of simple

51 «For it must be known that all things are *connected* in each one of the possible worlds: the universe, whatever it may be, is all of one piece, like an ocean: the least movement extends its effect there to any distance whatsoever, even though this effect become less perceptible in proportion to the distance. Therein God has ordered all things beforehand once for all, having foreseen prayers, good and bad actions, and all the rest; and each thing as an idea has contributed, before its existence, to the resolution that has been made upon the existence of all things; so that nothing can be changed in the universe (any more than in a number) save its essence or, if you will, save its *numerical individuality*» (GP VI 107–108/H 131). In order for him to point out that universal connection is a feature of each possible world, notice how Leibniz resorts to the physical example of the transmission of motion in a fluid, which is usually mentioned when he discusses the physical account of connection as *sympnoia panta*. Cf. Leibniz to Sophie, Autumn 1696 (A I 13: 84–89/LTS 145–146). In this sense, the completeness of the complete individual concept just describes and mirrors the mutual dependence and connection of things (cf. A VI 4: 1625/LoC 321). On this point and, more generally, Leibniz's theory of universal connection, see also Ottaviani (forthcoming).

understanding or knowledge of vision. His oscillation between these two accounts, in my view, signals his struggle – not necessarily to assign a distinct role to middle knowledge as such, but to find a place for its object: *contingent possibilities*. These are sometimes referred to as “contingent possibles”, at other times as “conditioned existences” – both of which ultimately amount to what I term “possible existence”. Thus, the proper object of middle knowledge should be understood as the possibility of individuals, in contrast to the possibility of abstract concepts or incomplete notions.

On this point, scholars have noted that the nature of the distinction between possible and actual existents is ontological rather than modal⁵². Emphasizing middle knowledge (and its reduction to knowledge of vision) should be seen as a question of the ontological status of individuals known by God, rather than their modal status. Crucially, from the standpoint of mere possibility – i.e., of possible worlds or divine ideas – there appears to be a stratification of entities: a fundamental distinction between particulars and general entities that is independent of the modal distinction between the possible and the actual.

6.2. The Case of Divine Wisdom

The level of possible individuals and possible worlds can be viewed as an intermediate stratum between the abstract realm of eternal truths and the domain of actually existing things. From the perspective of divine faculties, Leibniz sometimes refers to this intermediate level as governed by God’s wisdom (*sapientia, sagesse*), which occupies a sort of conceptual space between God’s understanding and his will⁵³.

Though Leibniz often reduces this triadic structure to a simpler dichotomy – understanding and will – neglecting the intermediary function of wisdom renders certain interpretive problems insoluble. Typical examples include: Is compossibility a logical or merely contingent notion? Is the case of a solitary monad genuinely possible or merely fictional? Does the Principle of the Identity of Indiscernibles hold in all possible worlds, or only in the actual one? Each of these problems reflects a common structural tension, and Leibniz’s texts often provide differing answers.

52 On this point, see especially Griffin (2013: 146–148).

53 The same occurs with Leibniz’s oscillations concerning “middle knowledge”, i.e., if it has to be reduced to knowledge of simple understanding (understanding) or to knowledge of vision (will). Another similar problem occurs with Leibniz’s distinction between *essential* and *accidental* properties, because sometimes he seems to make room for properties of a third, intermediate kind: the *natural* ones. Cf. in particular LH IV 7C, Bl. 82; *New Essays* IV, ix, §1, A VI 6: 433–434; GP IV 582; Grua 373. On this topic, see Ezio Vailati’s unpublished dissertation, *Leibniz on Natural Predication*, University of California, San Diego 1985. However interesting, the idea of natural properties cannot be discussed here; any such discussion must be postponed to another occasion.

Take, for instance, the Principle of the Identity of Indiscernibles. Though commonly held to be necessary – in the sense of: true in all possible worlds – in a letter to Clarke, Leibniz writes as follows: «This supposition of two indiscernibles [...] seems to be possible in abstract terms, but it is not consistent with the order of things, nor with the divine wisdom, by which nothing is admitted without reason» (GP VII 394/AG 333). Here, Leibniz is not affirming the contingency of the principle (in the sense that it fails in some possible worlds), but rather that the supposition of two indiscernibles *appears* possible *in abstracto*, though it is incompatible with the *order of things* («*sparaît possible en termes abstraits; mais elles n'est point compatible avec l'ordre des choses*»), which corresponds to the domain of divine wisdom. And since this domain constitutes the realm of possible worlds, the “possibility” of indiscernibles is restricted to the abstract domain, such as geometric forms, and is excluded from any genuinely creatable world. Thus, the principle is neither metaphysically necessary nor properly contingent. Possible worlds are limited to those that conform to divine wisdom, and divine wisdom excludes scenarios lacking sufficient reason, such as those involving indiscernibles or solitary monads⁵⁴.

6.3. The Region of the Possibles: Stratification or Reductionism?

The classical interpretation of possible worlds posits that compossibility is an equivalence relation that partitions the totality of possibles into mutually exclusive, jointly exhaustive equivalence classes. Accordingly, there are no possibles beyond those grouped into possible worlds. One might object that compossibility applies only to individual possibles, while a broader set should include mere possibilities as well. Yet Leibniz’s position here is ambiguous: acknowledging a realm of possibilities beyond possible worlds risks a shift from nominalism toward a Platonic ontology⁵⁵.

54 For a very clear passage taken from a still unpublished text, see Leibniz’s draft letter to Samuel Crell (June 1708): «Therefore, I show that many things are either impossible to occur or at least ought not to be done by a wise [creator], even though they are commonly conceived as possible or at least not incongruous – such as, for example, two perfectly similar individuals, two substances having no interaction with each other, a perfectly empty space, a perfectly hard body, a moving object that is entirely at rest, a change by leap, and many other such things [...] (*Itaque multa fieri non posse aut certe a sapiente fieri non debere ostendo, quae tanquam possibilis aut certe non incongrua vulgo concipiuntur, qualia sunt (exempli causa) duo individua perfecte similia, duae substantiae nullum inter se commercium habentes, locus perfecte vacuus, corpus perfecte durum, mobile prorsus quiescens, mutatio per saltum et alia multa [...]*)» (LBr 182, Bl. 4r). Cf. also *New Essays*, Preface, A VI 6: 57–58.

55 This point must be related to the distinction between the level of general essences and the level of possible individuals (discussed in Chapters 9 and 10 below). In this sense, it is impossible to deny that, as far as what Leibniz explicitly says is concerned, one should not take necessary truths as «a subset of what is in God’s intellect after the consideration of His will», but, rather, necessity should be understood as «what is true independently of [possible worlds]», or what is contained in God’s intellect before any consideration of his will. In other words,

In §225 of the *Theodicy*, Leibniz writes as follows:

The infinity of possibles, however great it may be, is no greater than that of the wisdom of God, who knows all possibles. One may even say that if this wisdom does not exceed the possibles extensively, since the objects of the understanding cannot go beyond the possible, which in a sense is alone intelligible, it exceeds them intensively, by reason of the infinitely infinite combinations it makes thereof, and its many deliberations concerning them. The wisdom of God, not content with embracing all the possibles, penetrates them, compares them, weighs them one against the other, to estimate their degrees of perfection or imperfection, the strong and the weak, the good and the evil. It goes even beyond the finite combinations⁵⁶, it makes of them an infinity of infinities, that is to say, an infinity of possible sequences of the universe, each of which contains an infinity of creatures. By this means the divine Wisdom distributes all the possibles it had already contemplated separately, into so many universal systems which it further compares the one with the other. The result of all these comparisons and deliberations is the choice of the best from among all these possible systems, which wisdom makes in order to satisfy goodness completely; and such is precisely the plan of the universe as it is. (GP VI 252/H 271)

«to understand necessity one must not start with individuals and their properties, but, as with Plato, with essences and their properties» (Vailati 1986: 210). In contemporary philosophy, especially after Kit Fine's rehabilitation of the traditional framework, many philosophers have defended an account of necessity, and modality in general, based on essences rather than on possible worlds. Accordingly, also Leibnizian scholars have tried to see if the essence-based model works better than the possible-worlds approach to understand Leibniz's foundational account of modality. For instance, Griffin (2013) has defended the view that metaphysical necessity (what he calls "intrinsic necessity") must be explained in terms of the existence of something "following from" its essence or possibility (the idea behind Leibniz's view that God is a necessary being); but the characterization of such relation ("following from") is not very clear. Another attempt in this direction is represented by the recent work by Bender (2016). Also in this case, however, one should be very careful when trying to read an author like Leibniz through the lens of contemporary metaphysical debates. In many texts, the idea that essences are eternal is considerably weakened, and almost overruled as far as talking about essences (or natures) may be understood as talking about concepts or ideas (in the mind of God), and the latter, in turn, may be reduced to talking about propositions. As far as I can see, the Platonist strand is emphasized when Leibniz discusses eternal truths, especially when he deals with mathematical objects, because mathematical objects and propositions are regarded by him as a sort of Platonic archetypes which can only be partially approximated by concrete objects in the actual world. On the contrary, the nominalist strand prevails when the possibility of individuals and alternative possible worlds is taken into account. This is the core of Russell's original intuition I have mentioned above.

56 In the first draft of the work, Leibniz added the following remark: «that is, those which consist in a finite number of combined terms, as all those which we are able to conceive (*c'est à dire qui consistent dans un nombre fini de termes combinés, comme toutes celles que nous concevons*)» (LH I, 1, 2, Bl. 112r). The passage is not included in the final version.

This passage implies that (1) the totality of possibles is coextensive with divine understanding (if we assume, as the continuation of the passage makes clear, that “wisdom” stands for “understanding”, we can say that the totality of the possibles is coextensive with God’s understanding); but that (2) the distinction between divine understanding and divine wisdom *stricto sensu* lies not in the extension of their objects, consisting instead in the fact that combinations among possibles, and reflections upon them, surpass divine understanding only *intensively* and not *extensively*⁵⁷. The object of God’s understanding is the totality of the possible; what divine wisdom does, however, is to increase intensively divine knowledge by means of (a) an infinity of infinite combination between these very same possibles, and (b) a corresponding infinity of “deliberations” (divine decrees), or, better still, “reflections” (*réflexions*). Wisdom, then, does not expand the set of possibles but deepens divine knowledge through an infinity of combinations and *réflexions* – a concept Leibniz often invokes in the case of what we call intensional contexts, where substitution of co-referential terms fails⁵⁸.

From this, we can conclude that, for Leibniz, there are no additional possibles beyond possible individuals *extensionally* speaking; yet intensional enrichment occurs through divine wisdom. Possibles, when regarded intensionally, are deepened, not multiplied.

This helps in explaining why Leibniz both affirms and undermines the stratification of the domain of the possible. He requires such stratification to articulate key distinctions, yet often reduces intermediate levels to more fundamental ones. Thus, divine wisdom is alternately assimilated to either understanding or will; with middle knowledge assimilated either to simple understanding or to knowledge of vision; and truths about possible individuals assimilated to essential truths. Ultimately, the only enduring distinction may be that between essence and existence.

57 In a well-known passage of the *New Essays*, Leibniz spells out the distinction between the extension and the intension of a notion: «For when I say *Every man is an animal*, I mean that all the men are included amongst all the animals; but at the same time, I mean that the idea of animal is included in the idea of man. “Animal” comprises more individuals than “man” does, but “man” comprises more ideas or more formalities: one has more instances, the other more degrees of reality; one has the greater extension, the other the greater intension (*L’animal comprend plus d’individus que l’homme, mais l’homme comprend plus d’idées ou plus de formalités; l’un a plus d’exemples, l’autre plus de degrés de réalité; l’un a plus d’extension, l’autre plus d’intension*)» (NE IV, xvii, §8, A VI 6: 486, transl. mod.). As the original text shows, Leibniz equates “intension(s)” with “degrees of reality”, “ideas” or *formalitates*. Cf. the remarks in Spencer (1971).

58 Cf. *De affectibus*, 1679, A VI 4: 1441 fn21: «non posse intelligi notiones simplices sine accedentibus propositionibus, saltem nominatis reflexive (simple notions cannot be understood if not by means of propositions, at least those which are called reflexive ones)». On intensional contexts, see A VI 4: 672 and 752. Cf. Mugnai (1979) and Mates (1986: 130–132).

PART 1
LEIBNIZ'S EARLY VIEWS ON EXISTENCE

Introduction to Part One

To the best of my knowledge, the first hint at the question of providing a definition of existence in the writings of Leibniz can be traced back to a passage of an essay he appended to his letter to Duke Johann Friedrich of Hannover of May 1671, a short treatise, in fact, on “The Utility and Necessity of the Demonstration of the Immortality of the Soul” (*De Usu et Necessitate Demonstrationum Immortalitatis Animae*). In this programmatic text, Leibniz announces his intention to compose a work on the “Elements of mind” (*Elementa de mente*), which will remain incomplete, however, like many other of his projects. He also discusses the benefits that the composition of such a treatise will bring to several disciplines, including natural theology. Concerning the latter, he adds the following consideration:

I will say something more: neither will it be possible to explain what existence is nor will it be possible to explain how it can be attributed to anything unless a mind is presupposed. How superficial is our philosophy! If only we had just investigated the notion of existence, perhaps we would have already discovered a demonstration of the existence of God. Until now, however, no one was able to define what existence is and what it adds to essence. (§14, A II 1²: 182–183)

As Leibniz observes, the answer to the old question concerning the relationship between essence and existence is an indispensable presupposition to a reliable demonstration of the existence of God. In this text, the young Leibniz is implicitly suggesting that – once completed – his planned work, the *Elementa de mente*, would provide the required demonstration. Unfortunately, the project of the *Elementa de mente* was never realized. Among the many drafts that Leibniz devoted to it (some of which will be analysed below) there is nothing directly related to the above-mentioned demonstration. Not before his years spent in Paris (especially 1675–76) will the task of providing a definition of existence become a pressing issue for Leibniz, as a consequence of his recovery of the ontological proof for the existence of God (as well as of a new conception of essences and their reality). As I will show below in Chapter 4, moreover, one can find among the writings related to the *Elementa* project an early Leibnizian rejection of the ontological proof for the existence of God¹.

1 Of course, both in the *Dissertatio de Arte Combinatoria* (1666) and in the *Confessio Naturae contra Atheistas* (1668), the young Leibniz had already proposed his own proofs of the existence of God. These two attempts, however, cannot be regarded as examples of *a priori* proofs in the traditional sense, i.e., proofs moving from the cause to the effects. Furthermore, neither of these attempts start from the concept of God as the most perfect being or the necessary being as in the two main versions of the ontological argument; see further below, Chapter 4.

In the passage quoted above, however, there is an interesting point that deserves a closer look: Leibniz says that it would be impossible to explain what existence is (and how it could be attributed to certain objects) without presupposing the existence of a mind. At first, this passage seems quite obscure: it is not clear in which sense the presence of a mind (be it the divine or the human mind) would be able to explain the nature of what exists, nor is it clear how the existence of such a mind is connected with the old question of the relationship between essence and existence.

It has been suggested that what Leibniz has in mind in this passage is the view that «something exists if and only if it is a mind-like being or a state of such a being» (Mercer 2001: 292). Were this reading correct, the view expressed in 1671 would be very close to the late Leibniz's well-known claim that the only existing entities, in a strictly metaphysical sense, are monads and monadic states (i.e., perceptions)². However suggestive, this reading, in my opinion, does not fit very well with the texts of this period, where Leibniz clarifies that the kind of mind to be presupposed is just the divine mind. At the end of Part One of this book, I will try to address the question of whether (and in which sense) Leibniz's phenomenalism might or might not be regarded as a forerunner of his late monadological views (see especially Chapter 5 – §5.5 below). Suffice it here to emphasize that *if* (as I believe) what this passage suggests is just that the existence of things (especially that of the objects in the external world) presupposes the existence of the divine mind, *then* this argument leads to an *a posteriori* demonstration of the existence of God, not an *a priori* demonstration.

In the chapters that follow, I will focus on texts written by Leibniz between 1663 and 1671–72, a period before he moved to Paris, as well as on some texts of the early Paris years. The only exception is Chapter 4, in which a selection of texts from the late Paris notes (1675–76) is also taken into consideration. This choice is motivated by the fact that a common phenomenalist strand can be detected in Leibniz's reflections on existence going from his earlier Mainz years to the notes drafted in his last years in Paris. As mentioned above, a systematic account of the relationship between essence and existence (like that found in Leibniz's later writings) is basically missing in these earlier texts. I think this is not due to the fact that the views expressed by the young Leibniz were more confused, or less clearly expressed, than those of his more mature works, but, rather, that they were considerably different.

To partially anticipate the conclusions I will draw at the end of Part One, I am convinced that the distinction between what pertains to *essence(s)* and what pertains to *existence* is not immediately conceived in Leibniz's early reflections in terms of a distinction between the *possible* and the *actual*. To the contrary, the

2 Cf. Leibniz to De Volder, 30 June 1704, A II 4: 252/LDV 307; to Dancigcourt, 1716, Dutens III: 499.

opposition, at this stage, between essence and existence is principally understood in terms of the distinction between the *abstract* and the *concrete*, at least from the metaphysical point of view. From the epistemic point of view, on the other hand – or, if you prefer, from the point of view of what Leibniz called *philosophia de mente* –, Leibniz was mostly interested in establishing criteria for distinguishing what is *real* from what is merely apparent or *imaginary*. Of course, both correlates in this pair of opposite terms – abstract/concrete, imaginary/real – will play an important role in Leibniz’s mature philosophy as well, but note, in that case, how they have to be accommodated within a broader metaphysical framework, characterized by Leibniz’s ontology of the possible (which culminates in Leibniz’s theory of possible worlds).

Contrary to what is seen in his later works, the conception of existence which emerges from Leibniz’s early texts seems to be based on two fundamental assumptions of nominalist inspiration: first, the particularist claim according to which individuals (concrete entities) are the one and only kind of existing beings; secondly, the claim that what is not actually existing possesses no reality at all, which deprives non-actualized possibles (or unactualized essences) of any ontological status whatsoever, no matter how tenuous. In particular, according to Leibniz’s first account, existence is taken not as an abstract noun, but as a way of referring to concrete, individual ontological subjects. Furthermore, it is placed outside of the field of demonstrative knowledge (*scientia*). Given Leibniz’s conditional interpretation of universal propositions (where the existence of the ontological subjects is only hypothetically assumed), it is somehow natural to conclude that the task of providing a *definition* of existence must be considered an impossible one. At the predicative level, existence (i.e., reference to a domain of existing entities) has always to be presupposed; and this explains why the ontological argument cannot but fall short. Accordingly, the question of ascertaining what actually exists shifts from the level of predication and demonstrative knowledge to the level of sensible knowledge, i.e., experience. At this level, however, the main task is not to give a definition of existence, but, rather, that of providing a set of criteria to (pragmatically) distinguish reality from dreams, or what is real from what is barely imaginary (to echo the title of Leibniz’s *De Modo Distinguendi Phaenomena Realia ab Imaginariis*: see A VI 4, N. 299).

For these reasons, the analysis of the account of existence and existence-related issues that emerges from these early texts is indispensable if we are to arrive at a proper understanding of the evolution of Leibniz’s views on the topic. This analysis will be undertaken with due consideration given to two different interpretative issues: first, the young Leibniz’s critical reception of the legacy of late Scholasticism, especially Suárez, but also of the nominalist tradition through the mediation of Leibniz’s master in Leipzig, Jakob Thomasius (1622–1684); secondly, the impact of the *philosophi novi*, especially of Hobbes’ authoritative *De Corpore*, which represents one of the most influential and pervasive

sources used by the young Leibniz. The first of these issues will be addressed in Chapters 1 and 2, the second in Chapters 3, 4 and 5, dealing respectively with Leibniz's theory of predication, the rejection of the ontological argument, and Leibniz's phenomenalist account of existence.

There is something of a paradox that emerges from these consideration in tandem of the two main sources for these strands, i.e., Thomasius' rather dismissive, nominalistically-minded reading of late-Scholastic themes (like the principle of individuation and the eternity of essences) on the one hand, and Hobbes' criticism of the traditional metaphysics based on the analysis of language (including his deflationary reading of the distinction between essence and existence) on the other: however animated they were by radically different (and even opposed) "ideological" aims, these sources provided the young Leibniz with a coherent set of philosophical tools, which constituted, so to speak, the building blocks which he used to shape his own philosophical intuitions at the beginning of his career.

Chapter 1. Existence and Individuation in Leibniz's *De Principio Individui* (1663)

«Dans mes premières années j'étois assez versé
dans les subtilités des Thomistes et Scotistes»

(Leibniz to Princess Elizabeth, Nov. 1678, A II 1²: 661 or GP IV 291)

I have said that a systematic account of the relationships between essence and existence is absent from Leibniz's early works. I also qualified this claim, adding that I refer to something like the account one can find in Leibniz's mature metaphysics, for instance his theory of possible worlds and complete individual concepts. One could argue, however, that just such an account, or, rather the germ of such an account, was right at the centre of Leibniz's very first work, his *Metaphysical Disputation on the Principle of Individuation* [*Disputatio Metaphysica de Principio Individui*] (hereafter: DPI), the short thesis that a seventeen years old Leibniz defended in Leipzig in May 1663 under the supervision of his master, Jakob Thomasius, who also wrote the preface to the text.

Beyond the well-known question of the principle of individuation, it has been pointed out, for instance, that the real problem with which this dissertation was concerned was exactly that of the relationship between essence and existence¹. This claim is substantially correct but, again, it needs to be qualified. Before doing that, however, some preliminary remarks are in order.

1.1. A Controversial Starting Point? The Young Leibniz on Individuation (1663)

There is still no consensus among the scholars when it comes to the question of the role and significance of the DPI. Different interpretive trends can be highlighted. First of all, there are those who have explicitly suggested that Leibniz's view that an individual substance is individuated by its complete individual concept (i.e., the "complete concept theory of substance") had already been foreshadowed by the main claim defended in the DPI, i.e., the claim according to which things are individuated by their "whole being" or "whole entity" (*omne individuum sua tote entitate individuatur*)². This suggestion has been taken up by other scholars who have argued for a very strong continuity between the "whole entity" solution and the theory of complete concepts, also insisting on

1 «Le point crucial de la thèse est probablement ce qu'elle nous dit sur les rapports essence-existence» (Piro 2005: 8).

2 See, for instance, Mates (1986: 17–18).

the constant influence of Scholastic themes throughout the entire development of Leibniz's philosophy³.

Yet other scholars, however, have rejected the alleged continuity between the "whole entity" solution and the theory of complete concepts, either emphasizing the fact that the DPI amounts to nothing more than a "scholastic exercise", whose importance should not be exaggerated, or pointing out that, if correctly interpreted, the main argument of the DPI amounts to a dissolution of the Scholastic and late-Scholastic views on individuation rather than amounting to a genuine recovery thereof⁴.

The latter reading seems to be preferable, especially because it allows us to make sense of both what can actually be found and what is still missing in the DPI when we compare it to the mature theory of individuation as presented in the *Discourse on Metaphysics* (1686). In particular, I am sympathetic to the idea that the DPI's appeal to the *tota entitas* should be read as part of a "deflationary strategy", i.e., as «an exercise of deconstruction of the Scholastic paradigm from within, using the weapons made available by the nominalist variety of that tradition itself»⁵. The correctness of such a reading can be confirmed by several elements, both external and internal to the Leibnizian text. Among the external, the most striking one is that Thomasius himself, in his preface to the dissertation, interprets Leibniz's solution within the context of the nominalist tradition, as a way "to cut the knot" of the problem of individuation⁶.

The same conclusion, however, can be reached by an internal analysis of Leibniz's text, especially when trying to make sense of the question: what does Leibniz properly mean with the *tota entitate* solution? This question is intriguing, since Leibniz himself does not spend too much time giving a direct explanation of his own solution. To the contrary, he prefers to follow a somewhat oblique strategy, i.e., showing that, compared to all the other options advanced by the Schoolmen, the option based on the "whole being" is the only reliable one. As he writes at the beginning of the DPI, «let us first set up the various kinds of views [on the principle of individuation] in order, since truth is discovered by setting opinions off against each other, just as sparks fly when the flint is

3 See especially McCulloch (1996). McCulloch's book also contains an integral English translation of the DPI, which will be quoted in what follows as MLI. Along the same lines, see Cover-O'Leary Hawthorne (1999: 26–57).

4 Both Ariew (2001) and Courtine (1983), have insisted on the context in which Leibniz's DPI has to be placed, i.e., that of an academic dissertation, where the respondent (Leibniz in this case) was mainly supposed to defend the ideas of his master (Thomasius).

5 Di Bella (2010: 208). Cf. also Angelelli (1994).

6 See Thomasius' preface, A VI 1: 8: «But I particularly like this Entity of the Nominalists, which cuts the whole knot of this discussion and its thorniest intricacies with a very simple and at the same time, as I can judge, very true decision (*Sed maxime placet hic Nominalium Entitas, quae simplicissima, sed eadem simul, uti iudico, verissima decisione totum hoc nodum, et in eo spinosissimas trias dissecat*)».

struck» (DPI §3, A VI 1: 11/MLI 23, transl. mod.). However suggestive it may be, this image should not be taken too literally: one must acknowledge that the outcome of Leibniz's inquiry, i.e., the triumph of the "whole entity" solution over the other rivals, is not so much the result of a genuine dialectical process as the consequence of the way in which Leibniz has settled the question of the principle of individuation from the very beginning.

1.2. "Unum supra ens nihil addit reale". Leibniz against the Formal Distinction

In §§2-3 of the text, Leibniz clarifies the scope of his inquiry by stating that the question of the principle of individuation has to be understood in the following way: «we treat of something real and what is called a "physical principle", which would serve as the foundation (*fundamentum*) for the formal reason of the individual or individuation, that is for the numerical difference in the understanding; and this especially in created substantial individuals» (DPI §2, A VI 1: 11/MLI 23, transl. mod.). The principle in question, then, has to meet some conditions: it must (a) be "something real" and a "physical principle", which means that it pertains to the individual *in re* and not *in conceptu*, but, at the same time, (b) it should work as the real ground (*fundamentum*) for the formal notion of the individual as well, i.e., for the numerical difference in the understanding. Finally, (c) it has to be applicable to all created substances, be they material or immaterial substances.

The first two conditions, (a) and (b), indicate that the principle of individuation has to be interpreted in an ontological rather than epistemic sense, or, as Leibniz puts it, as a *principium essendi* rather than a *principium cognoscendi*. He distinguishes, in other words, between two different meanings of "individuation": the problem of individuality, i.e., of what it is in a thing (*in re*) that makes it that individual object, on the one hand, and the problem of choosing the right criteria for identifying and re-identifying particular objects (for instance, through time) and, thus, distinguishing them from each other. Note that what Leibniz calls "numerical difference in the understanding" must be grounded on what individuates things *in re* (I will shortly address the reason why Leibniz labels it a "physical" principle). Leibniz will further specify that such a "real" principle must also be an internal one, i.e., it must be intrinsic and not extrinsic to the thing itself⁷.

7 This requirement is not explicitly stated in §2 of the DPI, but it seems to be implicitly assumed in Leibniz's subsequent rejection of "negation" as a candidate for the role of "individual difference". In §12, he notes that, if negation is taken as something "outside the mind (*extra intellectum*)", the problem arises as to how a positive being can be constituted by a negative one. If negation, on the other hand, is taken as something "internal to the mind (*in intellectu*)", then this has nothing to do with the problem of individuation as such. In both

Finally, condition (c) requires that this ontological principle be a general one, for it must be applicable to all created substances without differentiating between material and immaterial substances. The latter condition, however, immediately rules out Aquinas' theory of individuation. For Aquinas «maintained that the principle in bodies was quantified matter (*materia signata*) and in angels their entity. Since we shall here abstract from material and non-material substances [...], we shall examine only the general opinions» (DPI §3, A VI 1: 11/MLI 23)⁸.

Having rejected out of hand Aquinas' solution, Leibniz considers the four possible alternatives for a general (i.e., universal) principle of individuation, to be evaluated in light of the three conditions, (a)-(c), presented above:

The principle of individuation is taken to be either the *whole entity* (1), or not the whole entity. Less-than-whole entity is expressed either by *negation* (2), or by something positive. Concerning the positive sense of less-than-whole entity, one may take one of two views: (3) there is a physical part of individuation that terminates its essence, *existence*; or (4) a metaphysical part that terminates species, *haecceity*. (DPI §3, A VI 1: 11/MLI 23)

This list is completely different from that proposed by Suárez in his authoritative treatise on the principle of individuation (the fifth of his *Metaphysical Disputations*). Suárez's list was based on the two traditional kinds of composition widely accepted among the Schoolmen, i.e., the physical composition of matter and form, and the metaphysical composition of essence and existence. Thus, in §5 of his *Disputation*, Suárez discusses, respectively, individuation through matter, form, existence and, finally, the “whole entity” solution⁹. Of course, both Suárez and the young Leibniz are supporters of the “whole entity” solution, but the Spanish Jesuit is only one among the many authorities the Leibniz quotes in support of this solution in §4 of the DPI. The list includes many nominalist thinkers and also two more recent authors, Abraham Calov and Daniel Stahl¹⁰.

cases, Leibniz concludes that negation must be grounded in something positive: see A VI 1: 14 (MLI 37).

8 On this point, Leibniz closely follows Thomasius' views. In the preface to the DPI, Thomasius is scathingly critical of Aquinas' theory of individuation through matter, and concludes that Scotus' theory of individuation is to be preferred over that of Aquinas since it can be applied to both incorporeal and corporeal substance. Thomasius's last word, however, is that, absolutely speaking, the nominalist solution (or dissolution) of the problem of individuation must be preferred to all the other views. Cf. A VI 1: 7–8.

9 Incidentally, it is worth noting that Leibniz's partition of the candidates for the principle of individuation (entity, negation, existence, and haecceity) closely resembles Scotus' original discussion of the topic in his *Ordinatio* II, d. 3, pars 1 (especially qq. 1, 2, 3, and 6). This does not prove, however, that the young Leibniz had any direct knowledge of Scotus' text, since it is probable that he refers to Zabarella's discussion of Scotus in the former's *Liber de Constitutione Individui*, explicitly quoted in the DPI §16 (A VI 1: 15). For a modern edition, see Zabarella (2016: 476–497). On this, see Di Bella (2008a: 544).

10 Daniel Stahl's work had been discussed by Thomasius in his *Dilucidationes Stablianae* (see Chapter 2 below). Leibniz himself, in the same period in which he was working on the DPI,

Leibniz shares with Suárez (and the whole nominalist tradition) the idea that all existing things are individual.¹¹ This “particularist claim” was clearly stated by Suárez in the first section of his *Disputation*, on the extension of the term “individual”: «All things that are actual beings or that exist or can exist immediately are singular and individual. I say ‘immediately’ in order to exclude the common natures of beings, which as such cannot immediately exist or have actual entity, except in singular and individual entities» (DM V, 1, 4/Gracia 32)¹². Since unity is coextensive with being, everything that has an actual being must necessarily have individual unity. This principle is the ground for Leibniz’s first and fundamental argument in defence of the “whole entity solution”:

That by means of which something is, by means of it that something is one in number. But any thing is by means of its entity. Therefore [anything is one in number by reason of its entity]. The major is proved in that oneness adds nothing real beyond being. All who defend this position use this argument (DPI §5, A VI 1: 12/MLI 101).

Leibniz employs the claim that «oneness adds nothing real beyond being (*unum supra Ens nihil addit reale*)» to prove the major premise of his argument. It should not go unnoticed that he is emphasizing a radically nominalist revision of the claim according to which unity and entity are coextensive concepts. Traditionally, the convertibility between oneness and being was accepted at the level of “transcendental unity”, but not of “numerical unity”; or, at least, the first thesis was non-controversial in the Aristotelian tradition, while the second was a matter of controversy, being a typically nominalist assumption¹³.

read and commented Stahl’s *Compendium Metaphysicæ* (1655); see A VI 1: 21ff. In one of these notes, Leibniz also favourably quotes Abraham Calov’s rejection of the *ens in potentia*. Some of these notes will be discussed in the following chapter. In the DPI Leibniz refers to Calov’s *Metaphysica Divina. Pars specialis*, in A. Calov, *Scripta Philosophica*, Lubecae, Alberti Hakelmanni 1651, 30–31. Cf. Leinsle (1985: 411–417). See also the recent work by Ragni (2024).

- 11 On the diffusion of nominalism among late Scholastic authors, see Caruso (1979). Cf. also Heider (2014).
- 12 As J. Gracia (1994b: 486), points out, when Suárez says that “everything, insofar as it exists, is individual”, the term “everything” refers to every entity with the exception of common natures (like “human being”), which means: purely spiritual beings, composite beings, material beings and all their features, principles and components. Section vii of DM V is explicitly devoted to the question of the individuation of the accidents, whereas this question is voluntarily omitted by Leibniz in the DPI.
- 13 More than twenty years later, Leibniz, in his discussion with Arnauld, will repeat the claim that what is not truly *one* being is not truly *one being* either (see 30 April 1687, A II 2: 186/LA 121). In that case, however, the convertibility of being and oneness is used only to reject the substantiality of aggregates and composite substances, to prove that composite substances depend on simple substances for their reality. As Rutherford (1995: 130–131) observes, we «must not confuse [Leibniz’s] reductionism with his nominalism. The basis of the former lies in the primacy of the existence of substances as *entia per se*, the basis of the latter in the division between *concreta* and *abstracta*». The question of composite substances is silently passed

As a matter of fact, however, such a difference had already been weakened by Suárez, who regarded it as a purely conceptual distinction¹⁴. In a sense, one can say that Leibniz is endorsing here a «qualified [form of] Suárezian nominalism»¹⁵, where the qualification has to be foregrounded, in order to show Leibniz's distance from Suárez's original account.

For our present purposes, the most relevant difference between Leibniz's approach in the DPI and the Suárezian model, however, concerns their different attitudes toward Scotus' position. According to the partition presented in §3 of the DPI, Leibniz regards haecceity as having the potential to fulfil the role of principle of individuation in the “physical sense”, where “physical” is opposed to “conceptual”. On Leibniz's list, the “whole entity” solution is opposed to negation, existence, and haecceity, insofar as these three are regarded as partial aspects of the entity that should account for the individuation of the whole thing itself. Leaving aside negation (because it is not intrinsic to the thing itself), both haecceity and existence are taken as positive parts of the *entitas*. Existence is taken as a *physical part* that terminates (i.e., completes) essence, while haecceity is taken as a *metaphysical part* that terminates (i.e., completes) essence. In this case, however, the distinction between the physical and the metaphysical part does not have the same meaning as that between the physical and the conceptual understanding of the principle of individuation in §2 above. Both existence and haecceity, indeed, are regarded as principles of individuation in the physical sense of §2, but they are distinguished because haecceity is now taken as a part of the essence internal to it or as something formal. Existence, by contrast, is taken as something external to the essence itself and, in this sense, as a “physical part”.

over in the DPI, except for a short mention of the fact that the idea that form and matter supply the principle of individuation of a substance is not in contrast with the “whole entity” solution, but has to be regarded as subordinate to it, as a special case of a more general principle; see DPI §4, A VI 1: 12.

- 14 This point has been noted by Courtine (1983:182–183), in order to show that Leibniz's view is not the same as that of Suárez. Courtine himself acknowledges, however (186), that sometimes Suárez seems to suggest that the individual unity and the transcendental unity of the entity amount to one and the same thing. According to Gracia, individual unity and transcendental unity are extensionally the same but conceptually different for Suárez, since transcendental unity must be real but the only real kind of unity in things is individual unity (1994b: 482–483). Suárez's discussion of the principle of individuation in DM V has to be read in connection with his discussion of universals in the subsequent DM VI: *On Formal and Universal Unity* see Suárez (1964).
- 15 Cover–O'Leary Hawthorne (1999: 31), where this label is referred to Leibniz's view that common natures are abstracted by the intellect from singular individual substances and that, accordingly, there is only a conceptual distinction (*distinctio rationis*) between singular things and common natures. Since there is no real distinction, there is also nothing like a true composition between common natures and individual differences. In rejecting any sort of composition whatsoever (even a merely conceptual one), Leibniz's position can be regarded as a radicalization of a nominalist tendency already present in Suárez (or, which is the same, an extremely nominalist reading of Suárez).

To understand this point, one must recognize that, by criticizing existence as the principle of individuation, Leibniz is criticizing the Thomist theory of the “real distinction” between essence and existence. When dealing with haecceity, on the other hand, Leibniz is criticizing Scotus’ theory of the “formal distinction”. As I will show, Leibniz sides with Suárez (and Scotus) in his criticism of the real distinction between essence and existence. In his discussion of haecceity, on the other hand, Leibniz portrays Scotus as an “extreme realist”, i.e., as someone for whom universals have a true reality outside the mind¹⁶. This is already anticipated in §5 of the DPI, where Leibniz discusses his first argument in favour of the “whole entity” solution, while then noting that the Scotists rejected the major premise of this solution, i.e., the convertibility of entity and individual unity. This can happen because the Scotists make room for something in between the real and the conceptual distinction, the so-called “formal distinction”. It is unsurprising, therefore, that the longest part of the DPI (§§16–26) is devoted to providing a series of arguments against Scotus’ position and, especially, against the very possibility of a formal distinction¹⁷.

Contrary to Leibniz, Suárez did not include haecceity among the possible options for the principle of individuation in the “physical sense”. He instead discusses Scotus’ theory, along with the nominalist thesis, in the second section of his DM V, devoted to the analysis of what we would call the “intension” of individuality. While Suárez, in the first section, had emphasized the particularist claim that everything that exists is individual, in the second section he focuses on what the individual nature adds to the common nature, trying to find a reconciliation between two apparently opposite views: namely, that of Scotus, on the one hand, and that of Ockham and the nominalist tradition, on the other¹⁸. While embracing the thesis that everything that exists is individual, Suárez does not embrace the nominalist view concerning the nature of individuality, i.e., that there is no distinction at all between the individual and the common nature, because he acknowledges that this would amount to rendering the whole question of the principle of individuation pointless.

Thus, he proposes a sort of third way between Scotus and Ockham, trying to reconcile the latter’s particularism with the view that the individual adds something real to the common nature. Against the nominalist thesis, Suárez maintains that (a) individuality does add something “real” to the common nature; while at the same time adding that (b) the individual unity is not distinct

16 Cf. DPI §17, A VI 1: 16/MLI 56. For a parallel between Scotus and the young Leibniz on individuation, see Hoffmann (1998). See also the more recent paper by De Candia (2016). This Platonist reading of Scotus can be traced back to J. Thomasius, *Dilucidationes Stablianae*, Leipzig 1676: 27–28 (reprint with the same pagination in Thomasius (2005)).

17 Cf. especially DPI §24: «If there is no formal distinction, haecceity falls» (A VI 1: 18).

18 On the architecture of Suárez’s disputation and its philosophical relevance, see Di Bella (2008b: 142–148).

ex natura rei from the common, specific nature (otherwise there would be a true composition between the two). Then, if the distinction between the common nature and the individual difference is not real, it must be a conceptual distinction: «I say, thirdly [c] that the individual adds to the common nature something conceptually distinct from it, belonging to the same category and metaphysically composing the individual difference which contracts the species and constitutes the individual» (DM V, ii, 16/Gracia 52, *letter added*). From (c), however, it does not follow that that which is added (the individual difference) is something conceptual, i.e., a being of reason (*ens rationis*). This is the core of Suárez's interpretation. In this sense, he chooses not to explicitly reject Scotus' formal distinction, but instead provides an extremely charitable reading of it, collapsing Scotus' formal distinction into his own *distinction of reason* (with a *fundamentum in re*)¹⁹. In order to accept the plausibility of a metaphysical composition between the species and the individual difference, it is enough for Suárez that «the specific notion could be [considered] with precision (*praescindi*) by the mind as not included in this individual difference» (DM V, ii, 19/Gracia 54); he refers to the notion of *abstractio praecisiva*, which does not imply a separation in things (on the side of the world, so to speak) but only a separation between objective concepts, like in the case of the objective concept of “human being” as such, which is said to be *secundum rationem praecisus* from Peter, Paul and all the other singular human beings, without any real distinction whatsoever²⁰.

In the last part of the second section of DM V, Suárez observes how «the specific nature expresses an objective concept separate conceptually (*secundum rationem praecisum*) from individuals». This conceptual distinction is somehow required by the fact that human knowledge does not grasp the individual as it is in itself but only «things conceived universally, with which definitions and demonstrations are immediately concerned» (DM V, ii, 31/Gracia 61–62). The concept “human being” does not, as such, express or include in its essential notion any individual difference (thus making room for the idea of the principle of individuation as something added to the common nature), even if «human nature is not found in reality as common and abstract, in the way it is conceived by the intellect» (*Ibidem*).

At the level of what Leibniz calls the “physical principle of individuation”, Suárez is strongly committed to the (nominalist) thesis that each individual is individuated by its “whole entity”. The fact that he does not reject the possibility

19 In DM VII, Suárez distinguishes two different kinds of conceptual distinction: one not grounded in reality (*quae non habet fundamentum in re*), which he calls *distinctio rationis ratiocinantis*, since it has its sources only in the operations of the intellect; and the other that is grounded in reality (*quae habet fundamentum in re*), which he calls *distinctio rationis ratiocinatae*. On the latter, see especially DM VII, i, 4 (Vollert, 18–19). The formal reason is reinterpreted as a *distinctio rationis ratiocinatae* in DM V, ii, 15 (Gracia 52).

20 Cf. DM II, ii, 16. Suárez's discussion of the so-called *abstractio praecisiva* is deeply intertwined with his account of the distinction of reason on the one hand, and with the theory of objective concepts on the other hand; on this, see Courtine (1990).

of talking of individuation in terms of the addition of an individual difference to a common nature, however, leaves open the possibility for a “metaphysical composition” at the level of conceptual analysis. While retaining the first point (thus emphasizing the nominalist tendency implicit in Suárez himself), Leibniz completely rejects the second part of the Suárezian solution, i.e., the very possibility of a “metaphysical composition” even according to the weak sense made possible by Suárez’s theory of conceptual distinction. When discussing Scotus’ views, Leibniz makes it explicit that there can be no third way between the real distinction and a tenuous mental distinction, where the latter implies that there is no such a thing as an “individual difference” properly said. He also says, in §19 of the DPI, that there are some «who reduce Suárez to Scotus (*sunt qui Suaresium ad Scotum trahant*)», because of what Suárez said in DM V, i.e., that «the individual adds something beyond the common nature, however *ratione distinctum*» (DPI §19, A VI 1: 16/MLI 60)²¹. Oddly enough, Leibniz considers this as an attempt to reduce Suárez to Scotus because he knows that, for Suárez, there is no such a thing as a “common nature”, for the latter is just the result of an act of abstraction operated by the understanding. In his argument against haecceity, Leibniz’s main premise is that species *per nihil contrahitur, quia extra mentem nulla est* (DPI §20, A VI 1: 17).

In the architecture of the DPI, there is space, after all, only for one kind of distinction “on the side of the world”, the real one, and it is on this basis that Leibniz proceeds to reject all of the alternatives. The “whole entity” solution, at least in the way in which it is presented by Leibniz, therefore amounts to the very rejection or dissolution of the problem of individuation, since it maintains only that each individual is individuated by itself. Individuality is a primary fact, and the mysterious *tota entitas* of any individual is just the individual itself²². Note, however, that there is no way to take this claim as equivalent to the mature Leibniz’s view that each individual is individuated by a complete individual concept. It is true, even for the young Leibniz, of course, that there is a primacy of essence over existence, at least for what concerns the question of individuation. Even Leibniz’s apparent commitment to individual essences, however, does not allow us to draw the conclusion that the “whole entity” of the DPI is the same as the complete individual concept of the *Discourse on Metaphysics*.

21 The printed text of the DPI refers to “Disp. Met. 5, sect. 11 n. 16”, which is a mistake, for the correct reference is to section 2 n. 16, that is text (c) quoted above. This has been noted by Cover–O’Leary Hawthorne (1999: 33 fn28).

22 On this point, see Angelelli (1994: 539). Against the attempt to read the formal distinction as a “distinction of reason”, Leibniz contends that, if this is the real interpretation of the formal distinction, then it is of no help in solving the question of the principle of individuation, which «ought to be sought apart from the intellect» (DPI §24, A VI 1: 18/MLI 66). Leibniz’s reasoning seems to be the following: if the supporters of haecceity interpret it just a difference «that is apt to move the intellect distinctly», then the ontological question of individuation seems to be completely dissolved as well. But this is absurd, and (*pace* Suárez) in order to make sense of the formal distinction, it cannot be disjointed from a realist account of universals.

1.3. Essence and Existence. Leibniz against the Real Distinction

As anticipated in the last paragraph, one might say that the young Leibniz accepted the view that there are, alongside general essences, also individual essences; or, better still, that the only genuine essences are the individual ones, general essences being nothing other than abstractions. Such a commitment seems to be implied by what Leibniz says in §§7–8 where he defends the “whole entity” solution: there is a nature, e.g., in Socrates, which is intrinsically determined outside of the mind (*extra intellectum*), and this follows from the rejection of universals *in rebus*. If there is no such thing as a nature indifferent to be determined as the nature of Socrates or Plato or someone else, then it follows that “the nature of Socrates individuates itself” and that the humanity of Socrates intrinsically differs in number from the humanity of Plato, etc. Leibniz considers three arguments against this conclusion, but dismisses all three as being “of little importance”. The second one is interesting, however, because it introduces for the first time the topic of the distinction between essence and existence:

If essence in itself lacks existence, and it does not imply it, it follows that essence is indifferent in itself [to existence]. But the first is true in that what can be and can be conceived as opposite to something else does not include that something else. But essence can be and can be conceived without existence. Therefore [essence does not include existence]. I respond: essence is either taken as it is in the intellect and for the quidditative concept and, on this view, existence is not [contained] in the idea of essence; or it is taken according as it is in the thing and, on this view, I deny that it can be without existence. (DPI §10, A VI 1: 14/MLI 103, transl. mod.)²³

In the case of the distinction between essence and existence, one can raise the same problem as was mentioned above, this being the question about the common nature, i.e., whether there can be an essence (nature) indifferent with respect to existence and non-existence (being the nature of this or that individual). This objection comes from Soncinas (see fn 23), who, as a Thomist, was a supporter of the real distinction between essence and existence. The point of the objection is that essences, insofar as they can be conceived without existence, are really distinct and that there is therefore an essence indifferent to existence as well as non-existence. Leibniz’s answer is that such a distinction holds only *in intellectu* and not *in re*, and the transition from the conceivability of such a

23 McCulloch shows that this objection is taken from the Thomist philosopher Paulus Soncinas, *Quaestiones Metaphysicales Acutissimae* (Venice 1588, reprint Frankfurt a. M. 1967: 164): «It should be known, first, that actual existence is outside of the idea of the quiddity of anything finite. This is plain, because no thing can be understood the opposite of something pertaining to the quiddity, just as it is plain that man cannot be understood to be inanimate or irrational. But any finite quiddity can be understood not to be. Therefore, existence is not in the idea of a quiddity» (translated by McCulloch 1996: 166)

distinction to its reality is invalid. If essences are self-individuated natures, then they cannot be really distinguished from existing individuals.

Leibniz will expand on this point in §§13–15 of the DPI, where he discusses and rejects the idea that existence is the principle of individuation. As said above, while his discussion of haecceity is entirely devoted to a demolition of the theory of formal distinction, his discussion of existence as a principle of individuation is particularly concerned with the theory of the real distinction between essence and existence. Leibniz introduces the topic by noting that the thesis that existence is the principle of individuation can be taken in two different senses:

In one way, existence might be some real mode, intrinsically individuating the thing and distinct *a parte rei* from its essence. If this is the case, it can by no means be defended, as will become clear shortly. But, if existence differs only mentally from essence, [this position] agrees uncommonly well with us. Moreover, it expresses in what respect essence would be the principle of individuation. (DPI §13, A VI 1: 14/MLI 46)

Without qualification, the thesis that existence is the principle of individuation is ambiguous. Taken in a realistic sense, i.e., following the view that essence and existence are really distinct, this claim is impossible to defend. Taken in a nominal sense, i.e., following the view that there is only a conceptual distinction between essence and existence (as stated in the passage quoted above), this is just another way of expressing the “whole entity” solution, and, as Leibniz claims, it is helpful to understand in which sense essence works as the principle of individuation. In §13, he ascribes this view to one of his teachers in Leipzig, Johann Adam Scherzer²⁴. In his answer to the question about the principle of individuation, Scherzer identified the latter with existence in the following sense:

The principle [of individuation] is either external or internal. [...] The *internal* one is either *physical* or *metaphysical*. The *Physical* one is this union between *this matter* and *this form*²⁵. The *Metaphysical* one is *Existence*, to express it with only one word.

24 «And so I understand the excellent *Scherzer*, who was my teacher, based on a careful reading of his q. 43, *Breviarum Eustachii de S. Paulo* (Atque ita intelligo Excell. *Scherzerum* Praeceptorem meum summo studio observandum q. 43. *Breviar. Metaph. Eustachii de S. Paulo*)» (DPI §13, A VI 1: 15/MLI 46, transl. modified).

25 According to the terminology of the Scholastic tradition (see Thomasius, *Dilucidationes Stablianae*, 20), there are three ways in which an essence can be said to be composed. It can be composed by logical parts (like genus and specific difference), by physical parts (matter and form), or by metaphysical parts (*essentia* and *subsistentia*). While the first kind of composition takes place when a mind thinks of an essence in terms of its definition, the other two kinds of composition take place *in rebus extra mentem*: either in all created substances (metaphysical composition) or in corporeal ones only (physical composition). The term *subsistentia* refers to existence, but in a particular case, namely that of ontologically independent substances (*existere per se et sine aliquo sustentante*). Cf. Suárez, DM XXXIII, i, 1.

Therefore, I am *this* and not *that* because I have *this existence* and not *that existence*. [...] But you say: Existence itself is THIS THING because of some Haecceity. I reply in the negative way: for existence is THIS THING by itself. Or, to speak more accurately, Existence is not THIS THING, but, rather, the principle by means of which all things are THESE THINGS. Like, for instance, whiteness is not white, but the principle by which all things are white. Unity is not number, but the principle of all numbers²⁶.

On this point, however, Leibniz is also faithfully following the account given by Suárez in the fifth section of his DM V. Suárez himself begins by pointing out that the opinion concerning existence can be rejected in two ways, i.e., either assuming that it is based on a real distinction or asserting that existence is nothing but the actual entity of each thing. The latter is rejected only in the sense that it is an obscure and ambiguous formulation of the true view, insofar as «it attributes to existence rather than to essence the reason for individuation, even though this does not apply to existence except insofar as it is the same with essence» (DM V, v, 2/Gracia 114).

Leibniz's discussion of existence in the DPI is entirely focused on the rejection of the idea that essence and existence are distinct *a parte rei*²⁷. This was also the main target of Suárez's discussion of existence in DM V. In order to reject the real distinction, however, Suárez puts forward three arguments, none of which is discussed by Leibniz in the DPI. These arguments, and especially the first one, seem to be more in keeping with Leibniz's mature views on individuation and existence than with the views expressed in the DPI. All three arguments follow a similar strategy: they concede, for the sake of the argument, that existence and essence can be really distinct items, and conclude, even so, that existence cannot be the principle of individuation.

The first argument moves from the premise that essence as such (i.e., before being actualized by God) is made individual; the common nature (the general essence), therefore, «is not contracted into the individual essence by existence». Alongside general essences (like "human being"), Suárez explicitly makes room

26 «Principium est vel Externum, vel Internum. [...] Internum est vel *Physicum* vel *Metaphysicum*. *Physicum* est haec unio inter *hanc materiam* et *hanc formam*. *Metaphysicum* uno verbo est *Existentia*. Ideo ego sum *hic* non *ille*, quia ego habeo *existentiam hanc non illam*. [...] Inquis: *Existentia ipsa est HAEC* per aliquam Haecceitatem. Resp. Neg. *Existentia enim est HAEC* per se ipsam. Imo accurate loquendo, *Existentia non est Haec*; sed principium, per quod omnia sunt HAEC. Sicuti v.g. albedo non est alba; sed principium per quod omnia sunt alba. Unitas non est numerus sed principium numeri omnis». (Scherzer, *Breviarium Eustachianum*. Frankfurt 1665, quaestio 43, 288–289).

27 The real distinction between essence and existence was traditionally defended by the Thomists, and rejected by all the other schools. However, it is very unlikely that Aquinas himself had actually defended the real distinction. For a synthetic but very detailed exposition of the history of this misunderstanding, see Porro (2002). For an overview of the different positions on the distinction between essence and existence in late Scholasticism, see Di Vona (1968).

for individual essences. As he says: «Peter and Paul, as abstracting from actual existence, that is, as possibles, intrinsically include their individual natures (*rationes*), by which they are distinguished» (DM V, v, 3/Gracia 114)²⁸. At this point, however, he adds something more about the relationship between essential and individual differences:

[...] because specific, that is, essential, differences accrue to the species by a necessary connection, according to which propositions in which essential predicates are predicated are said to be perpetually true; [and] so, [likewise], its individual difference accrues to the individual. Hence, it is as necessary for Peter to be this man, as to be a man, and it is as necessary for Peter to be placed under man, as [it is] for man [to be placed] under animal. Therefore, this contraction and subordination is not caused by actual existence, which comes contingently to the fully constituted and individuated essence. (DM V, v, 3/Gracia 114)²⁹

The priority of essence over existence (and of possibility over actuality) is stated in a rather strong way in this passage, where Suárez states that one and the same kind of necessity holds between the case of the predication of essential properties in the traditional sense (like “Peter is a man”) and that of individual differences (like “Peter is this man”), which turn out to be individually essential. In other words, he is claiming not only that individuals as such are perfectly and completely determined at the level of unactualized possibilities, but also that individual differences have the same modal status of essential properties. Thus, he concludes that existence «comes contingently to the fully constituted and individuated essence», which sounds very similar to the superessentialist reading of Leibniz, which states that existence (or possible non-existence) is the only contingent property an individual can have.

The other two arguments used by Suárez concern the distinction between act and potency, but are still based on the priority of essence over existence. Essence as such has to be conceived as already individualized because, otherwise, existence should be understood as the actualization of an undetermined potency, and not of a singular one. Finally, since essence, as it relates to existence, «is both prior in the order of nature and also in perfection», existence itself will be a “this” (i.e., the existence of Peter or the existence of Paul) only by being the actualization of an individual essence (i.e., of *Petrinitas* or *Paulinitas*, to use a jargon that one can find also in Leibniz; see A VI 4: 1374). Such a primacy of essence was already present in Scotus’ discussion of existence as a

28 Cf. also DM XXXI, vi, 16/Wells 96–97.

29 Some interpreters have rightly emphasized the superessentialist consequences of this claim, and, of course, its affinity with Leibniz’s mature views: see Courtine (1983: 187–188), and Di Bella (2010: 223–226).

principle of individuation³⁰. When rejecting existence as a principle of individuation, Scotus stresses exactly this point: existence cannot have proper differences which are different from those already present in the essence. The being of existence is exclusively (*praecise*) determined by essential determinations and, thus, it cannot determine anything else by itself³¹. In particular, Scotus points out that existence receives all its determinations from what he calls the “predicamental coordination”, i.e., the categorial order of essences. Scotus’ point will be literally rephrased by Suárez in his third argument³².

Coming back to the DPI, one can see that the Scotist argument is just briefly mentioned at the end of §15 without any further discussion. The only argument we can read about there, in fact, is somewhat different from those we find in both Suárez and Scotus. Leibniz’s argument can be summarized as follows. If essence and existence are not really distinct items, i.e., they are the same *a parte rei*, then existence cannot be the principle of individuation (see §14). At this point, Leibniz focuses only on showing that the main premise of the argument is true: if one assumes that essence and existence can be separated from each other (as the real distinction requires), only absurd consequences will follow. In particular, it will follow that «essence exists apart from existence», i.e., we would say, as a non-actualized essence. Separated from existence, essence can either be a real thing (*ens reale*) or nothing (*nihil*). If it is nothing, then this amounts to saying that there is no real distinction at all. The most interesting passage, however, is Leibniz’s rejection of the first option:

If, on the other hand, [essence] is a real being, it is either purely potential or actual being. Without doubt [it must be] the former, for it cannot be actual except through existence, which, however, we have supposed to be separated. If, therefore, essence is purely potential, all essences are prime matter. For two purely potential things do not differ, not even by relation to act, because this relation, since it would be a being in potency, is not real. If therefore essences are not different from matter, it follows that matter alone would be the essential part and things do not differ by species, for example, the essence of a brute and the essence of a man. For neither includes form, which is the principle of specific distinction and two purely potential things do not differ. And, if you so say that they differ through relations to the Ideas, there is no real relation, for then there would be an accident in God. (DPI §15, A VI 1: 15/MLI 47)

30 Here I am not interested in making claims on the question of whether Scotus ever accepted individual essences or not. Cf. King (2005).

31 See Scotus, *Ordinatio*, II, d. 3, pars 1, quaestio 3, nn. 61 and 62; the latter says: «but existence, taken as determined and distinct, presupposes the order and distinction among essences (*sed existentia, ut determinata et distincta, praesupponit ordinem et distinctionem essentialium*)».

32 Cf. Scotus, *Ordinatio*, II, d. 3, pars 1, qu. 3, n. 64 and Suárez, DM V, v, 5.

It is not easy to follow the thread of Leibniz's argument in this case. If essence and existence can be really separated, then essence is either purely potential or actual. If it cannot be actual, then essence must be purely potential being. But purely potential being is like primary matter, i.e., something completely undifferentiated in itself, so that there is no place for the distinction between genera and species: the essence of the brute would not be distinguishable from that of the human being, for there are no criteria of identity for two purely potential beings. What is unclear, however, is why, according to Leibniz, potentiality or potential being has to be understood in terms of primary matter (i.e., something completely indeterminate) rather than as a determinate potency or possibility.

For instance, one of the authors mentioned by Leibniz in this section is the Dominican theologian Paulus Soncinas, who, in his *Quaestiones Metaphysicales* defends the real distinction between essence and existence. Against the objections of the adversaries, he defends the idea that essence is potential with respect to being (*essentia est potentialis respectu esse*), but he explains that there are two ways in which something can be said to be *simpliciter in potentia*: the first way is that of something which is actual in no way, either with respect to itself or to something else, and this is the case of *primary matter* only; the second way is that of something which is potential because it cannot exist by itself. The latter is purely potential not in the way in which whatever is potential is opposed to whatever is actual *simpliciter*, but as opposed to *that* specific actuality which is existence, and this is the way in which essence is said to be potential with respect to existence, though being an act in itself (*et sic essentia dicitur esse potentia simpliciter respectu existentiae, licet in se sit actus*)³³.

Leibniz's move can be understood, however, if we consider the fact that Leibniz, contrary to the Scholastic tradition (or, at least, to a large part of it), is not thinking of unactualized essences in terms of *possibilia* or completely determined individual essences; rather, they are equated with bare potentiality or primary matter: something completely indeterminate and unable to be the ground for distinction between traditional essences ("brute", "man"), let alone between individual essences. Apart from this awkward reference to the notion of primary matter, it is clear that the young Leibniz is following the approach of

33 Pauli Soncinatis, *Quaestiones Metaphysicales Acutissimae*, Lyon 1579, book IV, qu. 12, 20 (column b). The text continues as follows: «And therefore, insofar as it is potential, it is prior with respect to being – not that it actually exists without being, but because, before it has being, it is in potentiality to it; not in the sense that any essence is in the potentiality of some subject, as forms are said to be in the potentiality of matter, but rather in the active potentiality of God, who can bring forth the essence into being (*Et ideo ut est potentialis, est prior respectu esse, non quod sit actu sine esse: quia antequam habeat esse est in potentia ad ipsum, non ad hunc sensum quod quaelibet essentia sit in potentia alicuius subjecti, sicut formae dicuntur esse in potentia materiae, sed est in potentia activa Dei, quae potest producere essentiam sub esse*)». This corresponds to Aquinas' view that the possibles are reducible to God's active power: see my discussion in Chapter 2 below.

his masters in Leipzig – Thomasius and Scherzer, for example – who rejected the idea of ascribing any sort of reality to potential being, thus restricting being to what is actual only.

In one of his marginal annotations to Daniel Stahl's *Compendium Metaphysicae*, the young Leibniz synthetically exposed this view in this way: «Potential being is not being. Calov (*Ens pot[entialiale] non [est] Ens. Calovius*)» (A VI 1: 40fn). The same reference to Abraham Calov (or Calovius) can be found in Thomasius' preface to his *Erotemata Metaphysica* (1670), where he claims that he restricts the object of metaphysics to what is actual only, whereas the possible or potential being is banished to the domain of the *ens rationis*³⁴. In contrasting the tradition that conceives the possible as a real being, Thomasius says that he is following Calov's teaching in his *Metaphysica Divina* (1640).

In the corresponding passage of Calov's treatise, one can read the following statement:

Essence as constituted in actuality is the same as *existence*, therefore, once existence is denied, it is impossible that essence itself will be preserved [...] Those who state the opposite, i.e., that it can be ascribed to *creatures a real essence* even though they do not *exist* in order for the latter to be distinguished from *impossible and fictional things*, abuse too much of this terminology. A *real essence* without existence is impossible and fictional, because *real being* does not belong to something which is by *bare non-repugnance* [i.e., just logically possible]. And one should not talk of the *essence of a creature as potential*, unless *by external denomination by divine power*, which, however, brings no reality into what is creatable³⁵.

What is interesting is that Leibniz, in his mature works, will assume a position in some sense similar to that criticized by Calov, Scherzer, and Thomasius, making space for the idea that the possible should have a kind of reality intermediate between what is barely fictional and what is actual. In particular, he will

34 J. Thomasius, *Erotemata Metaphysica pro Incipientibus*, Leipzig 1670, Praefatio (without page numbers): «Such was the case when I restricted being – which is the object of metaphysics – to actual being alone, relegating potential or possible being to beings of reason, which truly are non-beings. For the doctrine that adds potential being to true and real beings has many disadvantages, and the opposite view had been advocated before me by the most Reverend Calovius among our own [Lutherans], and, among the Reformed, by Paulus Voetius. (*Quale illud est, cum ens, quod objectum sit Metaphysicae, restrinxi ad solum ens actuale, potentiali seu possibili ad entia rationis, quae vere sunt non entia, relegato. Habet enim ea doctrina, quae veris entibus ac realibus ens potentiale aggregat, multum incommodi, et contrariam sententiam praeiverant mihi Max. Rever. Calovius e Nostris, e Reformati Paulus Voetius*)». For more on the context of this passage, see Picon (2021: 164–167).

35 «Et *Essentia* in actu constituta est ipsa *Existentia*, unde negata *Existentia*, impossibile est, ut servetur ipsa *Essentia* [...]. Qui obvertunt, tribui *creaturis essentias reales*, etiamsi non *existent*, ut distinguantur a rebus *ficitiis et impossibilibus*, nimium abutuntur terminis. Fictitia est, et impossibilis *essentia realis* absque *existentia*, quum tò *esse reale* non competat rei, quae est per *nudam non repugnantiam*. Et *essentia creaturae in potentia* non dicatur, nisi per *denominationem extrinsecam a potentia divina*, quae nihil realitatis infert in creabilis» (Calov, *Scripta Philosophica*, 218–219; see also 249–250).

defend a form of Christian Platonism, in which the possibles are equated to divine ideas, i.e., the internal objects of God's understanding³⁶. This topic will be discussed in a more detailed way in the chapters that follow, where I will take into consideration other passages from Leibniz's early writings.

As for the DPI, it is notable that the young Leibniz, in the passage quoted above (from §15) briefly mentions (and immediately rejects) the hypothesis that essences can be distinguished "through relations to the Ideas" (A VI 1: 15); this I take to be a reference to divine ideas; the rejection follows, however, because «there is no real relation, for then there would be an accident in God». I understand this passage as follows: since essences (*qua* potential beings) are not already distinguished in themselves, one could say that they can nevertheless be distinguished by reference to the ideas of themselves, i.e., their counterparts in divine understanding. But if this constitutes a "real relation" (i.e., a relation between two real things), then there would be an accident in God, which is absurd. If it is not a real relation, it is just a "relation of reason", i.e., a case of what the Schoolmen called "purely extrinsic denominations"; relations produced, for example, by a mere act of understanding, like in the case of the relation between the knower and the known thing³⁷.

It is difficult to say if this short passage should be interpreted just as a sort of *argumentum ad hominem* against the supporters of the real distinction between essence and existence, or also as an implicit criticism of the so-called *esse cognitum*, i.e., the view according to which the ontological status of essences (before their creation) is a diminished one and consists in their being known by God. The second option seems more likely, however, if one acknowledges that the young Leibniz seems to share Ockham's criticism of the ideas in the mind of God. In particular, it seems that Leibniz is repeating the criticism moved by Ockham against Scotus' theory of the reality of possibles (the so-called production of creatures *in esse intelligibili*). Ockham objected to Scotus that a creature, insofar as it is conceived by God does not receive anything *formaliter* (no positive, intrinsic reality) but only an extrinsic denomination. In particular, he pointed out that the relation between God and a purely possible creature might be regarded either

36 Cf. *Theodicy* §20, GP VI, 114–115 (H 138–139); see also the passage from a text of 1696: «Moreover, the field in which ideas or possible essences subsist is none other than the divine understanding, of which they are the internal object, found within the divine essence itself. By this means these ideas or mere possibilities are, so to speak, made real; otherwise necessary and eternal truths would have no actual and existing foundation (*Outre que le champ dans le quel les idées ou les essences possibles subsistent, n'est autre chose que l'entendement divin, dont elles sont l'objet interne qui se trouve dans l'essence divine même, par la quelle ces idées ou ces simples possibilités, sont pour dire ainsi réalisées, autrement les vérités nécessaires et éternelles n'auroient point de fondement actuel et existant*)» (LH XXXIV, Bl. 51v).

37 Cf. Mugnai (2012: 192). In the Scholastic jargon, such relations were called "relations of reason" and were regarded as a type of "being of reason" (*ens rationis*).

as a real relation or a relation of reason, but the former cannot be the case³⁸. Ockham's objection is grounded on the nominalist assumption that there is nothing in between a real and a barely conceptual distinction, as well as being grounded on the claim that God's knowledge of the creatures is a direct one and is not mediated by something like "divine ideas".

The common view (criticized by Ockham) said that God conceives of the creatures only insofar as they are represented by the divine essence. Rejecting the identification of divine ideas with the divine essence (because God's essence is absolutely simple), he also rejected the possibility of identifying ideas with a relation (*respectus*) between God and creatures. Notice that even a relation of reason (a barely conceptual one) is thus excluded, for a relation of reason is directed to beings of reason (*entia rationis*); but if ideas are identified with beings of reason, they cannot work as the exemplars of real beings. Thus, Ockham's conclusion is that creatures themselves are ideas: «God himself or the divine essence is one intuitive cognition both of itself and of everything else producible and not producible, that is so perfect and so clear that is also an evident cognition of past, future and present things»³⁹.

In a draft devoted to a defence of transubstantiation, written around 1668, Leibniz notes that the divine mind consists of the idea of all things, but specifies, in a marginal note, that «ideas are the same as the substantial forms of things. Thus, ideas are in God as all action is in an agent, and as creation is in God. If it is asked whether the idea is created or not, I reply: is the created thing created or not?» (A VI 1: 510fn/L 120). A few lines later, he adds the following remark: «Divine ideas are the substance of things, not the essence of things» (A VI 1: 512). And in a series of notes on the same topic, he writes that «there are no ideas in God except as there are things outside of him», and «ideas of God and the substances of things are the same in fact (*idem re*), but distinguished only in relation, as action and passion» (A VI 1: 513/L 118–119)⁴⁰. Leibniz's claim that «ideas are in God as all action is in an agent» seems to recall Ockham's view that explains divine ideas in terms of God's act of intellections,

38 Cf. Ockham, *Scriptum in librum primum Sententiarum Ordinatio*, I, dist. 43, q. 2 (Ockham 1967: 646).

39 Ockham, *Ordinatio*, I, dist. 38, quaestio unica (Ockham 1967: 585). The discussion of ideas is to be found in dist. 35, q. 5, esp. 488ff. The translation of the quoted passage is taken from McCord Adams (1987: 1078). McCord Adams explains the connection between Ockham's rejection of divine ideas and his criticism of Scotus in this way: «according to Ockham's later view, when God understands creatures from eternity before they are produced in real existence, such creatures are nothing. Likewise, the divine ideas, which are the creatures themselves, are nothing. Since God does understand creatures, such propositions as "A man is understood" and "A horse is understood" are true. But these propositions can be true, even if horses and men are nothing at all. The only thing that must exist in order for them to be true is God's really existent act of understanding» (1077–1078).

40 The connection between this passage and Ockham's conception of ideas has already been highlighted by Picon (2021: 171); see also Di Bella (2005a: 135).

so that, properly speaking, there are no such things as divine ideas over and above God's intellections.

1.4. The Young Leibniz: What Kind of Nominalism?

So far, I have shown how Leibniz's re-proposition of the old controversy on the principle of individuation must be understood within the context of his commitment to a nominalist view of common natures, universals, and abstract entities in general. In this sense, contrary to appearances, Leibniz's explicit commitment to nominalism in his 1670 *Preface to Nizolius* and the criticisms of Scholasticism expressed therein are not incompatible with Leibniz's approach in the DPI. A somewhat negative attitude towards Scholastic philosophy seems instead to be a common feature of many among his earlier writings⁴¹. It is still not clear, however, to what extent one may consider Leibniz as a full-fledged nominalist, especially if (as many scholars have suggested) his particularism about actual entities goes hand in hand with a sort of Platonism about ideas and possibilities. Many scholars have regarded this alliance between nominalism (about the *actual*) and Platonism (about the *possible*) as one of the main tensions in Leibniz's philosophy; others have pointed out that Leibniz's position should be better conceived in terms of a *conceptualist* account of ideas: divine ideas, in particular, are just concepts in the mind of God, and this would not be in contrast with his nominalism about actual entities⁴².

As far as the mature and late Leibniz is concerned, the contrast between his commitment to the "reality" of divine ideas (essences and possibles as far as they are known by God) and his nominalism has been interpreted as a misreading⁴³. Nominalism rests on the division between concrete and abstract beings, where the former (i.e., individuals) are the only inhabitants of the actual world, while the latter (species or general essences, relations, possibilities, etc.) only

41 In addition to the *Preface* to his re-edition of M. Nizolius' *Antibarbarus Philosophicus* in 1670 (A VI 2, N. 54), frequent criticisms of the Schoolmen's way of doing philosophy can be found in Leibniz's letter to Thomasius of April 1699 (A II 1²: 23ff), then reprinted as an appendix to the former, as well as in his first writing on the question of the theodicy, the German text *On the Omnipotence and Omniscience of God*, ca. 1670–71, A VI 1: 537–546; see also a text dated 1673, *L'Auteur du Peché*, A VI 3: 150–151, where Leibniz explicitly shares Hobbes' criticism of the Scholastic account of evil as a privation of good. Leibniz will later reconsider his own position on this point, however, thus rehabilitating the core of the Scholastic view. Cf. Rateau (2019: 40–47 and 108–111).

42 Cf. Schepers (2014: 227–231). For a recent discussion, see also Oliveri (2021:213–245).

43 Such a contraposition has been emphasized by Mates (1986: 176–178), who (moving from Quinean worries about any ontological commitment to intensional entities) recommended that Leibniz's discussion of the reality of the possibles be read in dispositional terms, i.e., in terms of God's capacities or intentions. The plausibility of such a reading has been questioned by Fabrizio Mondadori in his review of Mates' book (Mondadori 1990b), where he observes that the idea of a modally non-vacuous disposition to think makes no sense in the context of God's understanding; see also Mondadori (1990a).

have an existence in the understanding, and, in this particular sense, they can be regarded as *entia rationis*⁴⁴.

This claim, however, can be interpreted in two different ways – a weak and a strong one – as has been shown by Fabrizio Mondadori.⁴⁵ Mondadori shows that Leibniz’s particularist claim according to which the only inhabitants of the actual world are individual substances (with their individual accidents) and nothing else, is compatible with two different interpretations. The difference between these two interpretations rests on the sense in which one understands the notion of “reality”. According to the first interpretation, (1) “real” is opposed to “unreal *tout court*”; according to the second, (2) “real” is opposed to “ideal”. Thus, when one says that abstractions are not real, one can mean either that (1) abstractions are unreal *tout court* or that (2) they are just ideal entities, which have no actuality (do not belong to the actual world) but only a kind of reality *secundum quid*. The same, of course, can be said of the possibles.

According to (1), “reality” simply coincides with “actuality”, and there is no third possibility between to be real (actual) and to be nothing. In contemporary terms, the first approach would be characterized as a strict form of actualism, as in the case of Quine’s notorious rejection of purely possible beings. On the other hand, the point of view expressed by (2) neither matches with a full-fledged Platonist position (in contemporary sense) nor with Meinong’s distinction between existing and barely subsisting things. The ontological status of ideal beings according to (2), properly speaking, is that of the *objective being* of the Scholastic tradition, in particular that of the *esse cognitum* of the Scotist tradition: a kind of diminished being, distinguished from both the full-being of actual existence on the one hand, and from the non-being of mere fictional entities on the other hand⁴⁶. The very possibility of this intermediated kind of

44 On relations, for instance, Leibniz notes in a writing of 1703 that: «A relation [...] may be called a being of reason in a certain sense, even if it is real, since all things are themselves constituted by the force of the divine intellect, which is also the reason why possibilities and truths are eternal, even when they lack existence» (*Ad schedam Hamaxariam*, ca. 1703, edited and transl. in Ottaviani–Arthur 2021: 101–102). Leibniz is replying to Gabriel Wagner’s claim that relations are mere *entia rationis*, without any further qualification; see also NE II, xxv, §1: «Relations and orderings are to some extent *beings of reason*, although they have their foundations in things; for one can say that their reality, like that of eternal truths and of possibilities, comes from the Supreme Reason» (A VI 6: 227, italics mine). Cf. NE II, xxx, §4, A VI 6: 265.

45 Cf. Mondadori (1995: 177–183), where Mondadori distinguishes between “full-blooded” and “qualified nominalism”, where the first option basically amounts to Mates’ position, the second to his own interpretation of Leibniz.

46 Notice that I am not ascribing a nominalist position to Scotus himself (quite the contrary; Scotism, as shown above, was regarded by Leibniz as form of extreme realism). My claim is restricted to the idea that possibilities and ideal beings in general have a kind of *diminished being*. A conflation between nominalism about actual entities and conceptualism about abstracta and possibilia was the hallmark of Suárez’s interpretation of Scotus. While Leibniz’s considered views on this point will be very close to those of Suárez, I believe that the young

being is questioned by full-fledged nominalist authors – I have already shown above, indeed, that it was the object of criticism by authors like Calov and Thomasius.

According to many interpreters, position (2) seems to fit better with Leibniz's considered way of dealing with abstract and ideal entities, even though this does not mean that this position is completely free from difficulties⁴⁷. When there is a willingness to make space for something like a realm of "ideal entities", however, the fact that the distinction between concrete and abstract beings represents a distinction in thought which is not reflected in the (actual) world *does not imply* that these entities are completely fictional and unreal. In particular, from the end of 1670s onwards, Leibniz will show himself to be especially eager to distinguish his own nominalist position from the conventionalism of Hobbes, interpreted as the claim that all truths are arbitrary⁴⁸.

This transition is fundamental to any attempts to understand the genuine import of Leibniz's theory of truth in terms of conceptual containment and, especially, the warning that such an account of truth must be grounded in reality. In a well-known passage from the *Discourse on Metaphysics* (1686), Leibniz says that «it is evident that all true predication has some basis in the nature of things (*dans la nature des choses*)», and this is what the philosophers call *in esse* or "inherence" (A VI 4: 1540/AG 41). And in another passage, where he states that a proposition is true if the concept of the predicate is contained in the concept of the subject, he adds that, for this reason, «it is necessary that some connection holds between the concepts of the terms, i.e., there should be a foundation *a parte rei* from which the reason for the proposition can be given» (C 401–402)⁴⁹.

Leibniz maintains, on the one hand, that the sense of inherence involved in his theory of truth cannot be understood in terms of the inherence of real accidents in an individual substance, since this would amount to a reification of abstract entities. On the other hand, he wants to overcome the threat of Hobbesian conventionalism, stating that the reason why a proposition is true

Leibniz shared Thomasius' scepticism about the contamination between nominalism and the Scotism attempted by Suárez and other early Schoolmen; see further, my discussion in Chapter 2.

47 There are some difficulties, for example, concerning the priority of the concrete over the abstract in the case of the ideas in the mind of God. Additionally, it must be remembered that Leibniz, in his mature works, proposes a distinction between "real" and "logical abstractions", where the former are prior to the concrete entities, the latter posterior to them (see A VI 4: 987–988, 992; NE III, viii, §1, A VI 6: 334). Some of these issues will be discussed in the chapters that follow.

48 Cf. Mugnai (1990: 157–159).

49 In his discussion with Gabriel Wagner in December 1697, Leibniz writes: «The connection among concepts arises from the connection among the possible objects, i.e., ideas (*Connexio conceptuum oritur ex connexione objectorum possibilium, seu idearum*)» (A II 3: 687–688). I will comment on this passage in Chapter 9 below.

(the predicate is included in the subject) cannot rest just on an arbitrary connection among our ideas. Finding a way out of this dilemma thus depends on reference to divine ideas. The connection between the notion of the predicate and that of the subject has its ground not in actual things, but in the essences of things which are contained in God's understanding: «the assertion of the reality of divine ideas is in fact the only way to uphold a nominalist ontology, while at the same time preserving an objective ground for possibility and truth»⁵⁰.

This rather sophisticated account, however, presupposes a whole series of (mutually interconnected) concepts, like the conceptual containment account of truth, possible worlds, and the account of individuality in terms of complete concepts, plus the relation of "expression" that holds among concepts in the human mind and ideas in the mind of God. As I will try to show in what follows, none of these tools were available to the young Leibniz, at least not until the very end of 1670s. For instance, Leibniz's ontology of possible worlds will not emerge until the period between his last year in Paris (1676) and his first years in Hanover. In approximately the same period, he will start working on his account of substance in terms of "completeness": focusing at the beginning on substance as a complete being, then shifting to conceptual completeness⁵¹. His theory of truth in terms of conceptual containment emerges only in the essays on logical calculi of the early Hanoverian years (ca. 1678–79).

The picture that emerges from Leibniz's earlier writings, however, is considerably different from the one I have briefly sketched here. I will therefore deal with some of these topics (truth, possibility, the nature of propositions, etc.) in my attempt to provide a faithful picture of Leibniz's early account of existence. In the next chapter, I will focus on the topic of the eternity of essences in God, showing that Leibniz's earlier account of propositions and "eternal truths" is not incompatible with his refusal to ascribe any sort of reality to possible beings. If my reading is correct, then, the position defended by the young Leibniz seems closer to position (1) than to the austere form of nominalism represented by position (2). The transition thereafter from position (1) to position (2) will then represent the main interpretative framework to understand why and how Leibniz modified his views on existence in the years that followed.

50 Rutherford (1995: 119). My reading of Leibniz's theory of truth in this paragraph is heavily indebted to Rutherford's analysis of Leibniz's nominalism. For a detailed account of Leibniz's theory of truth as a form of correspondentism with possible rather than with just actual beings, see Rauzy (2001).

51 On this point, see especially Di Bella (2005a: 88ff).

Chapter 2. Nominalism and Eternal Truths. Jakob Thomasius and the Young Leibniz

Among the corollaries appended to DPI, there is one which concerns the question of Leibniz's contamination of Platonism, conceptualism, and nominalism in his early years. The fourth corollary says: «The essences of things are not eternal unless they are in God (*Essentiae rerum non sunt aeternae nisi ut sunt in DEO*)» (A VI 1: 19). Apparently, this claim (as well as the other corollaries to the DPI) are unrelated to the text of the dissertation, and this fact makes its interpretation extremely difficult. Here, I will focus on Leibniz's claim about the eternity of essences in God, showing that this claim is not in conflict with the early Leibniz's refusal to ascribe any sort of reality to merely possible beings. As in the case of the discussion on the principle of individuation, so too was the topic of the eternity of essences widely discussed by Leibniz's teachers, especially Jakob Thomasius. The claim that "The essences of things are eternal" constitutes the sixth rule of Daniel Stahl's *Regulae Philosophicae*, and was, as such, commented by both Scherzer and Thomasius¹.

2.1. The Eternity (and Reality) of Essences. An Ambiguous Claim

The issue for discussion here can be introduced in the following way: to say that essences are eternal insofar as they are in God seems to make it possible to ascribe a certain degree of reality to essences in themselves, understanding them as merely ideal beings or as the objects of God's understanding. This is the approach followed by the late Leibniz.

Curiously enough, on this very same point, he will refer to his master Thomasius in a passage from the *Theodicy*:

The late Jacob Thomasius, a celebrated Professor at Leipzig, made the apt observation in his elucidations of the philosophic rules of Daniel Stahl, a Jena professor, that it is not advisable to go altogether beyond God, and that one must not say, with some Scotists, that the eternal truths would exist even though there were no understanding, not even that of God. For it is, in my judgement, the divine understanding which gives reality to the eternal verities, albeit God's will have no part therein. All reality must be founded on something existent².

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- 1 On Leibniz's teachers in Leipzig, see Mercer (1999). The correctness of Mercer's reading, however, has been questioned in the contributions of the late Marine Picon: see especially Picon (2014a), (2014b) and (2021: 167–173). My reading of Thomasius and the young Leibniz is heavily indebted to Picon's excellent works.
 - 2 *Theodicy*, §184, GP VI 226/H 247. In the first draft of the *Theodicy*, Leibniz had written: «Feu M. Jacobus Thomasius celebre professeur à Leipzig dont j'ay l'avantage d'avoir esté disciple, n'a pas mal observé [...]» (LH I, 1, 2, Bl. 101v, italics mine).

Commenting on this passage, Fabrizio Mondadori correctly observes that Leibniz replaces Thomasius' original reference to Cajetan's thought experiment (see below) with a reference to "some Scotists"³. Leibniz refers to the following passage from Thomasius' text:

Since creatures owe their existence to divine will, in a similar way they ultimately owe their truth to divine understanding. We must be careful, however, that, not to advance beyond God with this argument, together with those who claim that, even if God is removed, and every understanding (included God's) is removed, the truths of the connections [in propositions] would nevertheless remain. [...] Thus, Fonseca [...] correctly chastises Cajetan's deviance, when he states that, if everything (including the first cause) were annihilated, with the only exception of me, my knowledge of a [non-existent] rose would still be retained⁴.

The implication of Cajetan's thought experiment is that «the framework of possibilities as represented in the Porphyrian tree would still exist even if there were no God»⁵. Of course, Cajetan was not a Scotist, so the first problem to solve is why Leibniz presents Thomasius' remark as a criticism of Scotus.

First of all, it should be pointed out that Leibniz's reference to Thomasius in the *Theodicy* is mediated by his reading of Bayle, because one should never forget that the text of the *Theodicy* is just a long commentary on Bayle's views and a critique thereof. Bayle quotes the passage from Thomasius (to which Leibniz refers in §184) in a marginal note of his *Continuation des Pensées Diverses* (1705), where he also refers to Cajetan's thought experiment⁶. In another passage of the same work, however (more specifically, in a note to chapter CXIV), Bayle writes: «Note that there are some Christian theologians (most notably, Scotus) who have said that the essences of things are eternal outside God's understanding. See Thomasius in *dilucidation. Stablianis*, p. 25ff»⁷. Bayle refers to those sections of Thomasius' work in which Leibniz's teacher discusses Scotus views.

3 Cf. Mondadori (2013: 228–233).

4 Thomasius, *Dilucidationes Stablianae*, I, 6, N. 102, 66–67. Cajetan's argument is discussed by Coombs (2003): in his *Commentary on Aristotle's Posterior Analytics*, Cajetan claims that «if everything were annihilated, including God and the heavenly spheres, but not me (that is, a solitary intellect), then my knowledge of a nonexistent rose would still remain». On Thomasius' criticism of Scholastic ontology, see Ragni (2024: 168–179).

5 Coombs (2003: 203).

6 Bayle, *Continuation des Pensées Diverses* (1705), in Bayle (1727–31), vol. III/1: 340, note. This passage is quoted *verbatim* by Leibniz in §183 of the *Theodicy*, including the reference to Cajetan: «Cajetan maintained that if he remained alone in the universe, all other things without any exception having been destroyed, the knowledge that he had of the nature of a rose would nevertheless subsist» (GP VI 226/H 246).

7 «Notez qu'il y a eu des théologiens chrétiens (Scot principalement) qui ont dit que les essences des choses sont éternelles hors de l'entendement divin. Voyez Thomasius in *dilucidation. Stablianis* pag. 25» (Bayle 1727–31, vol. III/1: 348, note). On this topic, see Solère (2002) and (2004). Cf. also Minerbi Belgrado (2008: 32).

I will show that Thomasius' criticism of Scotus' theory of essences is indispensable to a proper understanding of his position on the topic of the eternity of essences. As far as the textual question is concerned, one can think that Leibniz was just putting these two references together, insofar as Thomasius' criticism of the independence of essences is addressed not only to Scotus but, more generally, to any form of "modal transcendentalism" (see below).

The second question is whether Leibniz's position in the *Theodicy* corresponds to that of Thomasius. Leibniz thinks that the reality of essences (and possibilities) is given by the divine understanding, i.e., by the fact of being the internal objects of God's understanding; essences and possibilities, in this sense, would have no reality at all without God. At the same time, however, the mature Leibniz distinguishes between the reality and the possibility of essences, i.e., between their ontological and modal status, respectively. As he writes in a series of comments on Spinoza (ca. 1707), there is a sense in which essences are conceivable without God:

The very reality of the essences, indeed, that by which they flow into existence, is from God. The essences of things are coeternal with God, and the very essence of God comprehends all other essences, to the extent that God cannot perfectly be conceived without them. But existence is inconceivable without God [...]. (Beeley 2002: 5/AG 273)

Short of anticipating too much, let me just say that the claim that «God cannot be perfectly conceived without [the essences of things]» is one of the main targets of Thomasius' criticism in his book. If I am correct, and the young Leibniz's position is very close to the views of his masters and, especially, of Thomasius, then there is a substantial difference in his approach to the topic of essence and existence between his early years and his mature philosophy.

The text I will take into consideration here is Thomasius' *Disputatio 1 regula VI* from his *Dilucidationes Stablianae*. Even if this book was published only in 1676 (when Leibniz was spending his last year in Paris), it was based on the contents of Thomasius' lectures from earlier years; as the frontispiece of the book itself suggests, they had already been *privatim dictatae* to his students, as Leibniz himself recalls in a text from 1667⁸. The considerable space he devotes to the discussion of the nature of essences (about fifty pages!) is a clue to the extent to which he was particularly concerned with the topic⁹. He was especially

8 Cf. *Nova Methodus Discendaeque et Docendaeque Jurisprudentiae*, 1667, pars II, §24: «Therefore, the distinguished Thomasius is not laboring in vain over a careful explanation of the *Philosophical Rules*, and, as I hope, he will soon present it to the public (*Quare Regularum Philosophicarum accuratam explicationem non inutiliter molitur Cl. Thomasius, et, uti spero, propediem publico donabit*)» (A VI 1: 310).

9 Note that Stahl's original discussion (1616–17) of his sixth rule is only two pages long (*Regulae Philosophicae*, London 1672, 25–26). Scherzer's discussion of the rule in his *Vade Mecum sive*

interested in defending the claim that God is absolutely simple, and that only God is eternal. The entire purpose of his discussion, indeed, is to stress the fact that, properly speaking, no kind of eternity can be ascribed to essences in themselves, because that would jeopardize the absolute simplicity of God, as well as his uniqueness, since it would imply that there are as many eternal and necessary things as there are essences which are distinct from God himself.

Thomasius' strategy consists in the following two steps: first, he shows that eternity can be attributed to the essences of created things only in an equivocal sense and that, properly speaking, this amounts to saying that propositions of essential predication are necessary; secondly, he shows how to defend the necessity of essences and essential propositions without resorting to something necessary and distinct from God himself. I believe that the main points of Thomasius' analysis constitute also the basis of the young Leibniz's claim that "the essences of things are eternal only in God", and provide the key to understanding his early defence of eternal truths. By the end of this chapter, I hope that the reader will be able to fully appreciate the rationale behind Leibniz's strong rejection of the real distinction between essence and existence as presented in the DPI.

2.2. Thomasius on Eternal Truths: A Deflationary Account

On the issue of the eternity of essences, Thomasius' position can be described as an attempt at safeguarding the traditional Christian doctrines from the dangerous positions inherited by the ancient philosophical tradition, most notably the Platonic tradition. Thomasius harshly criticizes Plato for having positioned essences in some sort of intelligible world external to God Himself: this very dangerous idea somewhat infected a great part of the debates among the Schoolmen about the status of the essences in God¹⁰.

As a preliminary step to the discussion, and as a sort of criticism of the Scholastic tradition as well, Thomasius initially proceeds to disambiguate some of the fundamental terms that will occur in his discussion, starting with the terms "essence" and "eternity". He claims that the distinction between the essences *in Deo* and *in creaturibus* is an equivocal one: «For the essences of the creatures, insofar as they are in God, are not, properly speaking, the essences

Mannale Philosophicum (1654) takes only three pages (Leipzig 1675, 11–13); some passages from Scherzer's work will be quoted below.

10 This matches with Thomasius' criticism of Aquinas' theory that created substances are individuated by matter. Thomasius traces this theory back to the influx of Greek philosophy, which took matter as an independent and uncreated principle external to God Himself: see J. Thomasius, *De Ideis Platonis Exemplaribus* (1659), in Thomasius (1683: 297–298), where Aquinas' theory is traced back to Plato's hypostatization of prime matter. For an echo of these discussions, see Leibniz's remark on matter as the source of necessity in *Theodicy*, §20, GP VI 114–115.

of the creatures, but the unique and most simple essence of God himself [...] only taken in relation to creatures» (DS I.6, N. 10, 24). Accordingly, the term “the essences of creatures” cannot be taken as an intrinsic denomination at all, but just as an extrinsic one. Thomasius’ first clarification is nothing but a restatement of Aquinas’ exemplarist view: essences as such, before the creation of the world (i.e., taken as possible and not yet actualized) are nothing, properly speaking, i.e., they have no ontological status on their own, being nothing else but God’s infinite power. Aquinas’ doctrine thus provides a negative answer to the question about the ontological status of essences (and *possibilia*), though this does not involve their logical or modal status¹¹.

The question about the logical or modal status of essences, in other words, asks what is it for something to be possible, and does not, as such, commit anyone to ascribe to *possibilia* any ontological status whatsoever. While maintaining, for example, that something is possible if its concept does not entail a contradiction, Aquinas does not ascribe any ontological status at all to merely possible things. From an ontological point of view, then, possibles are said to be possible only by reference to God’s infinite power, and essences are said to be the essences of creatures only by reference to God’s *creatrix essentia*. Before their actualization, they are nothing at all, and to speak of the reality of essences in this sense is just an improper way of speaking of the absolute reality of divine essence. Talking of creatures *qua* possible is just talking of different respects or relations in which the divine essence can be imitated (this is the sense of Thomasius’ reference to divine essence *sumpta tantum cum respectu ad creaturas*, where the relation at stake is that of imitability).

In this framework, God’s knowledge of possibles creatures is not to be conceived as his knowledge of essences as they are in themselves (*in seipsis*) but only as his knowledge of essences as they are in God himself (*in seipso*). Thus, the only way to make sense of the claim that essences are in God is to deny that they have any kind of being in themselves, for the only thing that exists properly (before the creation of the world) is God. In this sense, Thomasius rightly claims that to say that essences exist or are eternal in God is a misleading way of expressing the idea that, in themselves, they have no reality at all. His main concern, after all, was to safeguard the simplicity of God against the position of a plurality of essences taken as something distinct from divine essence¹².

11 On the distinction between the modal and the ontological status of *possibilia*, see Mondadori (2000) and (2013).

12 According to Aquinas, unactualized possibles are known by God *quasi eius virtuti possibilia*, as if they were possible by God’s power alone. Cf. *Summa contra Gentiles*, I, 66, n. 10: God «*non cognoscit ea ut existentia aliquo modo in seipsis, sed ut existentia solum in potentia divina*». Because of this reference to God’s power, this cannot be regarded as a reductionist account of modal concepts, but only as a deflationist strategy about the ontology of modality.

Thomasius' recovery of something like Aquinas' theory, must be interpreted, however, as a reaction against the views of early modern Schoolmen, who, on this point, have followed Scotus rather than Aquinas. More than in the theory of divine exemplars in themselves, Thomasius is interested in the deflationist conception of *possibilia* which is involved in Aquinas' theory.

It should also be remembered that the Thomist paradigm, grounded on the principle that *scientia Dei est causa rerum*, went through an irremediable crisis in the early modern Scholastic debates¹³. The exemplarist paradigm was based on two presuppositions, both of which were turned upside down by the late Schoolmen: (1) the idea that God's knowledge of his own essence is (logically and ontologically) prior to his knowledge of the essences of other things (because knowledge of the cause is prior to knowledge of the effect)¹⁴; (2) the idea that God knows created things insofar as his science is both the cause and the measure of the latter: insofar as divine science is the (exemplar) cause of created things, God's understanding represents the standard of things, while human understanding, by contrast, needs to be adjusted to things in order to know them, for human science is somewhat "caused" by things.¹⁵ As we will see in the chapters that follow, the rejection of point (1) is part and parcel of Leibniz's mature philosophy, for he will claim that God would not be able to completely understand himself if he were not to understand the essences of things¹⁶.

Note that a similar strategy, based on Aquinas' deflationist account of essences and possible things, will be used in 1686 by Arnauld against Leibniz's theory of (purely possible) individual concepts, and, on that occasion, it will be explicitly rejected by Leibniz himself. For Arnauld, Leibniz is responsible for an unjustified confusion between the way in which we know possible things and the way in which God does. At that point, however, Leibniz had already subscribed to his theory of possible worlds, which requires that a certain ontological status (however weak) be ascribed to possible things¹⁷.

13 Cf. Schmutz (2002).

14 Cf. Aquinas, *Summa contra Gentiles*, I, 49, nn. 1-2. Cf. also *Summa Theologiae*, Ia, q. 14, art. 5.

15 Cf. Aquinas, *Summa contra Gentiles*, I, 61, b. 7: «The knowledge of the human intellect is in a certain way caused by things; hence it comes about that things knowable are the measure of human knowledge [...]. The divine intellect, however, by its knowledge is the cause of things. Therefore, its knowledge must be the measure of things, just as art is the measure of artifacts (*Scientia intellectus humani a rebus quodammodo causatur: unde provenit quod scibilia sunt mensura scientiae humanae [...]. Intellectus autem divinus per suam scientiam est causa rerum. Unde oportet quod scientia eius sit mensura rerum: sicut ars est mensura artificiatorum*)». On Aquinas, cf. Boland (1996).

16 See, for instance, Leibniz to M. Fardella, October 1692, A II 2: 594: «It must be understood that the essences of creatures are nothing other than various expressions of the divine perfection; and unless God understood them, he would not sufficiently understand himself (*sciendum est creaturarum essentias nihil aliud esse quam varias divinae perfectionis expressiones, quas nisi intelligeret Deus, nec se ipsum satis intelligeret*)».

17 Cf. A. Arnauld to Leibniz, 13 May 1686: «I confess in good faith that I have no idea of these purely possible substances, that is to say the ones that God will never create. And I am very

The basis of Thomasius' rejection of the real distinction between essence and existence is to be found in his rejection of any ontological status to essences prior to their actualization. Deprived of their actual existence, essences have no reality whatsoever, not even in God's understanding. The only kind of being that essences can have is the formal being (*esse formaliter*) they have *in rebus ipsis singularibus*, i.e., as created beings (DS I. 6. N. 22, 29).

Thomasius' second preliminary remark concerns the different ways in which the eternity of essences has been interpreted by the Schoolmen. He says that the question can be interpreted in two senses, a *logical* sense and a *metaphysical* one. In the logical sense, "essences" are to be taken as shorthand for essential propositions, which are complex entities (*entia complexa*), and the question is whether or not such propositions have eternal truth. Interpreting the question in a metaphysical sense, however, amounts to making the mistake of using the term "essences" to refer to *entia incomplexa*, i.e., the natures of created beings rather than the propositions which deal with their natures, and to asking if these natures are eternal beings or not (DS I.6, N. 11, 25). Thus, Thomasius rejects the tendency to nominalize propositions and to treat them as terms (or concepts), being worried by the possibility of taking the nature of propositions for a kind of being distinct from actual existence and subsisting in itself. His strategy is to consider reference to essences or natures as a misleading way of talking of essential propositions, and to claim that the question about the (alleged) eternity of the former must be reduced to the question concerning the necessity of the latter. For him, the metaphysical formulation of the question of eternal truths is just a misunderstanding originating from the influx of the Platonic ideas on theological debates.

Concerning the question of the eternity of essences, Thomasius distinguishes three main solutions, each of which corresponds to a different faction (*secta*) in the Scholastic tradition. The main distinction is that between the *Nominales* and the *Reales*: the former (the followers of Ockham) deny that essences are

much inclined to think that they are *chimeras* that we create, and that what we call possible, purely possible substances cannot be anything other than God's omnipotence [...]. For I am convinced in my own mind that although one talks so much of these purely possible substances, nonetheless one never conceives of any of them except under the idea of some one of those which God has actually created» (A II 2: 36–37/LA 31–32, transl. modified, italics mine); see also Arnauld's reference to God's science, A II 2, 36; cf. also Arnauld's *Theses Theologicae*: «The possibility of things is not presupposed by the divine omnipotence, but is constituted by it. Hence one should not say that God is omnipotent because He can do all possible things, but because He can absolutely do all things (*Possibilitatem rerum non supponit omnipotentia divina sed constituit. Unde dici non debet Deum esse omnipotentem quia potest omnia possibilis, sed quia absolute potest omnia*)» (Arnauld 1755–81, vol. X: 33–34). To refer to mere possible things as "chimeras" means to deprive them of any sort of reality, against Leibniz's doctrine that the possibles have a reality which corresponds to their tendency to exist; cf. GP VII 303. The similarity on this point between Thomasius and Arnauld has also been noted by Picon (2021: 170). On Arnauld's position, see Carraud (1995).

eternal, while the latter are divided into the Thomists, who claim that the essences are eternal only in God, and the Scotists, who claim that the essences are eternal *extra Deum* (DS I.6, N. 12, 25). As already noted in the case of the DPI, in this case also, as far as the question of essences is concerned, Scotus is regarded as an extreme realist¹⁸. In his account of the eternity of essences, Thomasius links Scotus' realist position to that of Plato (cf. NN. 16–17). Such a position is regarded by Thomasius as both «inadequate and false (*nec pertinens nec vera*)» (DS I. 6, N. 26, 31), and is contrasted with the positions held by both Aquinas and the *Nominales*. From what he said in his preliminary remarks, one could think that Thomasius' preference goes to Aquinas' position, but that would, in fact, be a mistake. Aquinas' position is considered “true but inadequate”, while only the nominalist position is considered “both adequate and true”. Aquinas' doctrine is true, as Thomasius himself remarked in the passage quoted above, but his view that «the ideas of things in God do not belong to creatures but to the essence of God himself» is *impertinens* (DS I. 6, N. 31, 32) insofar as it does not constitute a proper answer to the question of eternal truths (i.e., the necessity of essential propositions). Thomasius believes that Aquinas and the Nominalists took the term “essence” in two different senses, but that once this equivocation has been clarified, their positions can easily be reconciled. Aquinas' defence of the eternity of the essences in God is only a defence of the eternity of the divine essence itself.

The Nominalists rejected, on the other hand, the eternity of essences because they interpreted essences as referred to Platonic ideas: incorruptible entities that are separate not only from matter but even from God himself (see DS I. 6, N. 33, 33). When essences are taken in this sense, however, the only true and appropriate solution is the nominalist one, i.e., that the essences of created things are not eternal at all, an opinion that Thomasius deems straightforward to defend once one has already accepted that there can be no real distinction between essence and existence, a thesis which is in keeping with the tenets of Christian religion, according to which the existence of created things is not eternal, so that there can be no realm of eternal essences at all in a proper sense¹⁹.

18 A more charitable reading of Scotus's theory of *esse intelligibile* or *esse cognitum* was given by J. A. Scherzer in his *Dissertatio Metaphysica de Potentia Logica et Objectiva* (August 1654), in which he rejects the idea that «that “cognised being” according to the view of *Scotus* is something really distinct from the being of God (*illud esse cognitum ex sententia Scoti esse aliquid reale distinctum ab esse Dei*)»: see Scherzer, *Breviarium Eustachianum*, 404. The opposite view can be found in Thomasius: see, for instance, DS III.3 N. 11, 117–118.

19 Cf. DS I. 6 N. 34: «Moreover, the opinion of the Nominalists – that the essences of things [...] are by no means eternal – has plainly no difficulty, provided only that you observe that they themselves demonstrate with the firmest arguments that those essences of things do not really differ from the existences of the same things. For it is certain, according to the Christian faith, that the existences of things are not eternal» (33–34). On Thomasius' account

2.3. The Suárezian Synthesis and Its Breakdown

It may be observed that the solution Thomasius ascribes to the Nominalists is nothing but a radicalization of the view advanced by Suárez in the thirty-first of his *Metaphysical Disputations*, a sort of seminal text on the distinction between essence and existence in early modern Scholasticism. Suárez's position, however, is a very complex one, being an attempt at reconciling two different views on the topic. Suárez's account in DM XXXI consists of a synthesis between two different views on the eternity of essences²⁰. Thomasius chooses to separate the two elements of the Suárezian synthesis, retaining the first (the Nominalist approach) while rejecting the second²¹.

The main question is, what kind of being can be attributed to creatures before they are produced by God? According to the first view, the answer is a deflationist one: before they are produced by God, the essences of things are nothing at all (*omnino nihil*). Following this principle, Suárez proceeds to reject Henry of Ghent's account of an *essential being* (*esse essentiae*) taken as distinct and separate from the existential being of actual creatures, and to provide an interpretation of Scotus' theory of the *esse cognitum* which emphasizes the fact that such a kind of being is not intrinsically possessed by creatures in themselves, but is only an extrinsic denomination «from the potency of God and a non-repugnance on the part of the creatable essence» (DM XXXI, ii, 2/Wells 59)²². This view is in keeping not only with the traditional account of creation but also with the nominalist claim that there is no real distinction between essence and existence.

Such a position, however, faces several difficulties, especially as far as the question of the truth-makers of essential truths is concerned. Among those difficulties reported by Suárez, it is worth mentioning the following: «[...] because essential predicates are predicated or can be predicated truly of the essence from eternity; every truth, however, is based on some being». Another

of nominalism, see also his *De Secta Nominalium* (1658), in Thomasius (1683): 241–274, a text which constitutes a sort of *pendent* of the oration on Platonic ideas (mentioned above). On Thomasius' account of the history of nominalism, see Di Bella (2017b).

20 On the Suárezian synthesis, see especially Wells (1981). See also Wells's introduction to his translation of DM XXXI (Wells 21–25). For a more recent account, see Embry (2017).

21 Suárez is never explicitly mentioned in DS I. 6. Reference to DM XXXI, as well as to Gabriel Vazquez's theory of essences, is explicit in Daniel Stahl's text: see Stahl, *Regulae Philosophicae*, 25.

22 The objective being (*esse objectivum*) of the possibles was intended by Scotus as an *esse cognitum*, i.e., to be as being the object of knowledge. Scotus' detractors criticized the doctrine of objective, as the idea that the essences of things before creation have a real being, a sort of existence before actual existence, which was regarded as both absurd and dangerous (for it jeopardizes the very same notion of *creatio ex nihilo*). The latter was the way in which the late Schoolmen read Henry of Ghent's theory of essential being (*esse essentiae*). Suárez, by contrast, wanted to save Scotus' doctrine of the objective being from the extreme readings of his opponents, cf. DM XXXI, ii, 1 (Wells 57). On the interpretation of essential being, see Schmutz (1998).

problem arises when, if the essence of a creature in itself (and as an object of God's knowledge of the possible) is nothing real, there is then no difference between a possible being and a being of reason. But, if this is true, how can there be a «science of real being, since, properly speaking, it is about essence and not about existence?»²³. This represents a threat to the very definition of metaphysics the Suárez defends: metaphysics as a science of being in the sense of *essentia realis*, where “real essence” is not restricted to what is actual, but involves the actual as well as the possible, excluding only the being of reason, like chimeras and other contradictory objects²⁴.

Against the first difficulty mentioned above, Suárez replies that, for God to know from eternity the truth of a proposition like “Man is an animal”, «it was not necessary for the essence of man to have some real being in act from eternity, because that being does not signify an actual and real being but only the intrinsic connection between such extremes [the two terms, “man” and “animal”]» (DM XXXI, ii, 8/Wells 62). The only necessity involved is a conditional one, «for, surely, if a man is to be produced, he will, of necessity, be a rational man». This necessity is just a «certain objective identity of man and animal», which we know «by the composition which the word is signifies when we say that man, from eternity, is a rational animal». Suárez also specifies that the kind of being involved in the copula in the case of propositions of eternal truths «pertains to that third way in which being is sometimes said to signify the truth in a composition», i.e., what the logicians called a proposition *de tertio adiacente*, which is opposed to propositions *de secundo adiacente* (like *Deus est*), in which there is an explicit ontological commitment and the copula has an existential import²⁵.

But that being said, once existence has been removed, the essence itself perishes, and the conclusion seems to follow that «those propositions, wherein essential predicates are attributed of a thing, are neither necessary nor possessed of eternal truths» (DM XXXI, xii, 40/Wells 200). Remember that, in the

23 Suárez, DM XXXI, ii, 6/Wells 60–61.

24 On Suárez's notion of metaphysics, see the seminal text by Courtine (1990, part II, especially 195–227). Regarding contradictory beings like chimeras (or winged horses), one should remember that the notion of logical possibility in the Scholastic tradition is intrinsically connected to Aristotelian essentialism and the system of the Porphyrian tree. Cf. Coombs (2003: 195). A chimera, then, was regarded as the paradigmatic case of an impossible being because its concept implies essences (like that of a lion and a snake) that are mutually repugnant according to the structure of Porphyrian tree essentialism.

25 Cf. J. Thomasius, *Erotemata Logica pro Incipientibus* (1670), Leipzig 1692, 51ff. See especially 52–53, where Thomasius explains the traditional distinction between the existential and the essential reading of the copula, i.e., between propositions *de secundo adiacente* (or *secundi adjecti*) and propositions *de tertio adiacente* (or *tertii adjecti*). In the case of propositions *de secundo adiacente*, the term “being” (*ens*) has to be taken as a predicate that is implicitly concealed in the copula (for instance, *Deus est* has to be interpreted as *Deus est ens*). Such a treatment of existential propositions was a traditional one: cf. Nuchemalns (1992); Roncaglia (1996).

context of Aristotelian essentialism, the proper object of science is constituted by universal and necessary propositions²⁶.

Suárez accordingly concludes that necessary propositions have eternal truths «not only as they are in the divine intellect but also in themselves and pre-scinding from it» (DM XXXI, xii, 40/Wells 201). This leads Suárez to embrace a position that should have displeased authors like Thomasius. On the one hand, Suárez puts forward a deflationary account of essences as they are in themselves (A). On the other hand, the problem of eternal truths (and God's knowledge of them) leads him to stress the need for some objective ground which should be regarded as independent not only from God's will but also from his thought (B).

This second approach can be summarized in two steps. First, Suárez distinguishes between two ways in which the copula connecting the two terms (“extremes”) of a proposition can be interpreted: an existential and an essential sense. According to the existential reading, a proposition like “Man is an animal” indicates a real and actual connection, in which the truth of this proposition depends on the actual existence of the terms, because the copula is not divorced from time. In this sense, if you imagine a situation in which there is no man in the world, the proposition “Man is an animal” would be false according to the existential (temporal) reading. According to the second, essential sense, this proposition can be true even if its component terms do not exist, and since «the copula is, in the stated sense, does not indicate existence, it does not ascribe actual reality to the terms in themselves». The illusion of such an ontological commitment can be dispelled once one acknowledges that the true logical form of such propositions is a conditional one: «when we say “Man is an animal”, while abstracting from time, we say nothing else than that this is the nature of a man, that it is impossible for man to come to be without being an animal» (DM XXXI, xii, 44–45/Wells 203–204)²⁷.

26 Cf. Thomasius, DS I. 6 N. 36, 34: «This being so, someone will ask: if the essences of things are not eternal, how can their knowledge be preserved [...]? (*Haec cum ita sint, rogabit aliquis, si essentiae rerum non sunt aeternae, quomodo salvari possit earum scientia [...]?*)» This is the traditional question *de constantia subjecti*, i.e., of how there can be necessary and eternal truths about things that exist only in a contingent way.

27 The conditional interpretation of eternal truths has been proposed by Ockham: see *Summa Logicae*, III-2, v (Ockham 1974: 512–513). Ockham distinguishes two senses of “necessary”: an absolute one (to be perpetual and non-corruptible), which can truly be attributed only to God, and a relative one (the sense in which a necessary proposition cannot be false). Accordingly, even though genera, species, and all the other kinds of universals are corruptible and, thus, they can be nothing (once detached from God's knowledge of them), nonetheless, one can still have a scientific knowledge of them by forming necessary propositions about them. Note that Ockham equates conditional propositions and propositions about the possibles. On the diffusion of this solution in late Scholasticism, see Picon (2021: 242–246). From the historical point of view, the idea that at least certain categorical propositions can be interpreted as conditional ones must be traced back to Boethius. Cf. Maierù (1972: 376–379).

Suárez's second step is an answer to the question about the nature of such a necessary connection between non-existing terms. While the first step was mainly focused on the problem of the logical form of such necessary propositions, the second step is concerned with the ontological ground of such a necessity. Having rejected the Thomist account that grounds the eternal truths in the understanding of God, because both essential and accidental truths are in the divine understanding (cf. DM XXXI, xii, 40/Wells 200), the only available alternative is that such a necessity arises from «the object itself and not from the divine exemplar» (DM XXXI, xii, 46/Wells 206). The necessity of the connection is justified by reference to the identity or the unity of the terms of the proposition, pointing out that the act of joining together a predicate with a subject is actually nothing different from “the very entity of the thing” (the two terms being distinguished only through a relation of reason in regard to our concepts). Suárez also specifies that the identity sufficient to ground the necessity of such a connection can be found «in a being (ens) in potency, though it is nothing in act» (Ibidem). Such a reference to the ens in potentia, however, seems to be difficult to reconcile with the view (A), i.e., the nominalist claim that there is nothing intrinsically real to being in potency as such.

The reason why Suárez shifts from (A) to (B) is probably due to the second difficulty mentioned above, concerning the distinction between the possible as such and the being of reason. In his reply to this objection, he writes as follows:

[...] the answer is that the creature's possible essence insofar as it is the object of divine knowledge is not a being fashioned by the intellect, but is a being truly possible and capable of real existence. Thus, it is not a being of reason but it is in some way comprehended under the real being. For I have already explained above that the essence of a creature still unproduced is in some way a real essence (*essentia realis*). (DM XXXI, ii, 10/Wells 63)

In DM II Suárez dealt with the topic of “real essence”: he distinguished between two ways of taking the notion of being (*ens*), i.e., as a verb (or *ens participialiter sumptum*) and as a name (*ens nominaliter sumptum*). The former stands for the existential sense of being (or, better still, the act of existing: *actum essendi, ut exercitum*), the latter for the essence of a thing which has or can have being in the first sense²⁸. The latter (being in the nominal sense) is the proper object of metaphysics according to Suárez. Being taken as a name, however, is what

28 Cf. also Calov's *Metaphysica Divina*: «The third distinction of being is into being in act and being in potency. [...] The *basis* of the distinction is that *twofold notion* of being: in one sense it is taken *nominally*, insofar as it *precisely* denotes the essence without implying the act of existing; in another sense, *participially*, insofar as it signifies an *existing essence* (Tertia distinctio Entis est in Ens actu et potentia. [...] Distinctionis *fundamentum* est *duplex*: illa Entis *acceptio*, qua sumitur vel *nominaliter*, in quantum *praecise* dicit Essentiam non importato actu essendi, vel *participialiter*, qua *essentiam existentem* notat)» (*Scripta Philosophica*, 234).

possesses a real essence, and this is the mark that distinguishes it from a mere being of reason: the *ratio* of that kind of being consists in the possession of a real essence, where “real” means «*non fictam, nec chymericam, sed veram et aptam ad realiter existendum*» (DM II, iv, 4). This notion of “real essences” was the target of the criticism levelled by Calov and Thomasius in the passages discussed in Chapter 1 above (§1.3)²⁹.

Instead of a simple distinction between that which has being (i.e., is actual) and that which has no being at all, account (B) makes space for a threefold distinction, since, on the one hand, real being is opposed to the pure being of reason as fabricated by the intellect as something is opposed to nothing; but on the other hand, real being (as merely possible) is opposed to what is actual as nothing is opposed to something. In this way, account (B) incorporates account (A) by simply saying that, yes, being in potency is nothing, but only if compared to the actual being of existence; properly speaking, however, it is only a relative kind of non-being, to be carefully distinguished from the absolute kind of nothing represented by beings of reason (which cannot have any reality at all).

The latter distinction plays an important role in Suárez’s account of the truth-makers of eternal truths. For he remarks that «we should assign a difference between necessary connections, conceived and enunciated between possible things or real essences, and between imaginary things or beings of reason». The difference consists in the fact that in the former case the connection between the terms «is so necessary in terms of an intrinsic relationship of terms abstracting from actual existence, that it is still possible in relation to actual existence»; which means: in a proposition like “Man is animal” the copula abstracts from time, but still indicates «that man has a real essence so definible, or (which is the same) that man is such a being (*ens*) which is not a fiction but real, at least possible» (DM XXXI, xii, 45/Wells 205)³⁰.

2.4. Thomasius, Leibniz, and the Rejection of *Ens Potentiale*

It should be clear by now that Thomasius’ account is based on a nominalist reading that separates account (A) from account (B), retaining and emphasizing the former and strongly rejecting the latter. As a matter of fact, Suárez’s synthesis of (A) and (B), or his inclusion of (A) in (B), is not free of inconsistencies. In the case of eternal truths, for instance, they must be grounded in some kind of being, which must be carefully distinguished from the actual being of existence.

29 Accordingly, authors like Calov and Thomasius criticized Suárez’s characterization of the *ens rationis*; see the passage from Thomasius’ preface to his *Erotemata Metaphysica* (quoted in Chapter 1.3 above). In one of the corollaries to his *Specimen Quaestionum Philosophicarum ex Jure Collectarum* (1664), the young Leibniz endorses this view: «A being of reason is wrongly defined as that which neither is nor can be (*Ens rationis male definitur, quod nec sit, nec esse possit*)» (A VI 1: 95).

30 On the notion of “reality”, see also Marrone (2017).

The connection between the terms of those propositions is thus grounded in potential being. Potential or possible being, however, is defined by Suárez in merely negative terms, i.e., in terms of non-repugnance or the absence of contradiction (what he also calls “negative possibility”: cf. DM XXX, xvii, 10).

This negative account fits with the first step of Suárez’s theory of eternal truths, i.e., the conditional reading. In the case of a proposition like “Man is an animal”, what is known by God is only that if men were to be created by God, they must have such and such essential properties. As it has been pointed out, the kind of being at stake here is the *esse veritatis propositionis*, and the conception of possibility is a post-existential one: God knows that, if such a connection were to be instantiated in the actual world, nothing contradictory would follow³¹.

When he emphasizes the reality of essences, however, Suárez seems to shift from a barely negative account to a positive account of possibility, especially because the context of “real essence” is one in which God and the creatures are both conceived under the common concept of being nominally taken³². This means that one is talking of possibilities in a pre-existential sense. In contemporary terms, an actualist view seems to correspond to the post-existential account of possibility, while a possibilist view seems to be more in keeping with the pre-existential account of possibility³³. This means, in other words, that the ultimate source of logical possibility is not in God but, rather, is independent from God himself, a view that has been dubbed “modal transcendentalism”³⁴. The main idea is that necessary truths and possibles in general are prior to an intellect and being, be it the divine or the human one, even though their ontological ground is not actual, i.e., it cannot be described as actually existing in any sense whatsoever. This is the kind of modal transcendentalism harshly criticized by Thomasius in the passage quoted at the beginning of this chapter, where he blames those who claim that «even if God is removed, and every understanding (included God’s) is removed, the truths of the connections [in propositions] would nevertheless remain» (DS I. 6 N. 102, 66).

31 I take the distinction between post-existential and pre-existential account of possibility from Wells’ introduction to his edition of DM XXXI, especially 23ff.

32 Cf. Wells 24: «the more Suárez moves within the context of *essentia realis* [...], the more his perspective tends to move in a context where possibility and the truths based thereupon are completely underived».

33 In what follows, I will designate everyone who claims that there are no possibilities which are not grounded in some actual being as an “actualist”, and everyone who claims that there are some possibilities which are not grounded in something actual as a “possibilist”. For a formulation in terms of possible worlds, see Adams (1974: 224) and (2021: Ch. 1).

34 The term “modal transcendentalism” was originally coined by S. Knuuttila with reference to Scotus’ and Ockham’s theories of modality: see Knuuttila (1993). For its application to the context of the late-Scholastic debates, see Coombs (2003: 201–209). The correctness of Knuuttila’s interpretation of Scotus has been questioned by Hoffmann (2002).

According to modal transcendentalism, the existence of some mind or understanding is required but only in order to activate the connection holding between the subject and the predicate of necessary or possible propositions, whose truth, however, is completely independent from the fact of being thought by any intellect at all. If, *per impossibile*, God did not exist, it would still be true that human beings are rational animals, since the proposition “Man is a rational animal” is a necessary truth, its truth being independent from any efficient cause as well as any act of knowing it. The connection between “man” (or “human being”) and “rational animal”, however, acquires some kind of being (or reality) only insofar as it becomes the object of thought which actually thinks of it, typically the divine mind³⁵.

This sophisticated account, as already noted, is the main target of Thomasius’ criticism, which is substantially based on the distinction between the logical and the ontological aspect of the eternity of the essences, where the logical aspect is privileged and emphasized, while the ontological aspect is criticized as a source of errors and misunderstandings.

Thomasius agrees with Suárez that the necessity of essential propositions is grounded in the identity of the subject with the predicate (which basically means that if one says “Man is not an animal”, this amounts to saying “Man is not a man”). In the case of Suárez, however, grounding the necessity of essential propositions on the identity (or unity) between their constitutive terms was tantamount to grounding it in some potential or possible being, i.e., the *essentia realis*. For Thomasius, by contrast, such an account of being is only a source of equivocations. He recalls the traditional distinction between being as a participle (referring to what is actual) and being as a name, only to criticize the Schoolmen for taking the latter as a sort of potential being. Against them, Thomasius explicitly states that the primary and only meaning of “being” is that of “being as a verb”, i.e., the being of actual existence, while potential being can be called “being” only in an equivocal way.

On this point, as I have already pointed out in Chapter 1, the young Leibniz closely follows Thomasius’ teaching. In his early notes on Daniel Stahl (probably drafted around 1663–64), Leibniz criticizes Stahl’s distinction between *ens participialiter sumptum* and *ens nominaliter sumptum*, where the latter is taken

35 Cf. Suárez DM VII, vii, 27, which is also the polemical target of Descartes in his radical view about the creation of eternal truths: see his letter to Mersenne, 6 May 1630 (AT I: 149–150); cf. Marion (1991); Courtine (1990: 315–316). Following Scotus’ dictum, the possibility of things was taken as *formaliter ex se* and *principiative ab intellectu*: for something to be possible, it is sufficient that its concept does not involve a contradiction, whereas, in order to be intelligible (and, thus, to acquire some reality), such a concept must be thought by the divine understanding (the same holds, *mutatis mutandis*, in the case of propositions). Of course, this process does not presuppose any temporal sequence at all, the only priority at stake being a logical or “natural” priority; cf. Scotus, *Ordinatio*, I, d. 43, q. unica, n. 7; see also the passages quoted by Coombs (2003: 223), and Mondadori (2004).

as referred to essence *non habita ratione actualis existentiae*, like in the traditional example of the rose in the winter.

Against this essential notion of being, Leibniz notes:

Potential being can be called “being” (*Ens*) only in an improper way. Otherwise, it would follow that God could not make it that that being becomes non-being, i.e., he could not annihilate it. It will be enough to say that being is in potency only if one changes the meaning of the term (*termino alienante*), as a husband in potency is not a husband. If the author wants to maintain the expression “potential being”, it should explain it not as it were in potency with respect to being (*ad τὸ ens*) but, rather, with respect to existence (*ad τὸ existere*). (A VI 1: 23)³⁶

Potential being can be called “being” only improperly because the addition of “potential” to a noun alters or modifies the meaning of that term, as in the case of a “husband in potency”, which is no husband at all. In more up-to-date terms, Leibniz is rejecting what is called a *predicative reading* of the possible, i.e., the reading whereby the expression “possible husband” is equivalent to something like “there is something which is a husband and is possible”, from which it follows that a possible husband is a husband, a possible rose is a rose, and so on. In claiming that one should read “potential” (in “potential being”) as related to existence rather than essence, Leibniz is advocating for what is called an *attributive reading* of the possible, where “possible” plays the same role as “alleged” in expressions like “an alleged friend”. “Potential” represents an example of what Leibniz, probably inspired by Thomasius, calls a *terminus alienans*, i.e., a term which denies the proper meaning of the term to which it is attached: a “potential rose” is not a rose, an “alleged friend” is not a friend, or, to quote Thomasius’ example, a “potential rich man” is not a rich man³⁷. Note that “alienation” (*alienatio*) is a technical term in post-medieval logic, which was used to signify a particular kind of restriction on the supposition of terms, one in which a term is used improperly in an extended, metaphorical sense³⁸.

36 Cf. also A VI 1: 40; see also Picon (2014a: 50–51). The example of the rose in the winter will be positively mentioned by Leibniz in a passage in which he defends the validity of the ontological argument: see *De Synthesi et Analyysi Universalī*, ca. 1683–85, A VI 4: 542; see also Chapter 4 below.

37 Cf. Thomasius, DS I. 6, N. 70, 50: «Potential being, however, is proved to be a being equivocally, i.e., from the fact that *potential*, as such, is a limiting term that negates or excludes what precedes it; just as a potential rich person is truly not rich (*Ens autem potentiale aequivoce Ens esse probatur, inde, quia potentiale qua tale, terminus est alienans, seu id, quod praecedat, negans: sicut potentia dives revera est non-dives*)». The distinction between the predicative and the attributive function of an adjective had been originally proposed by P. Geach (1956). It has been applied to the interpretation of “possible” by Williamson (2000: 201–208) and (2013: 10–14).

38 Cf. Maierù (1972: 139–194); Ashworth (1974: 92). Notice that, in DM II, iv, 11, Suárez uses the distinction between precise and negative abstraction to distinguish between being in a nominal sense from potential being in Aristotle’s sense, insofar as being-in-potency is opposed to being-in-act in a privative or negative sense. On the other hand, by collapsing being

Thomasius adds, moreover, that the idea that there could be different degrees of nothingness, i.e., something which is more or less “non-being” than something else, is utterly absurd. But this goes against the idea that there can be something like the “real essence” which is nothing when compared to the being of existence, and something (or, at least, a non-nothing)³⁹ with respect to the being of beings of reason.

2.5. Existence (not Essence) as the Ground of Eternal Truths

Having rejected the claim that possible beings are the ground of the necessity of eternal truths, Thomasius concludes that existence is the foundation of their necessity («*Enim vero existentia fundamentum est necessitatis*»; see DS I. 6 N. 81, 56). He distinguishes between absolute and hypothetical necessity, adding that only the latter can be ascribed to the creatures. This distinction is a traditional one, but the interesting point here is that Thomasius makes it explicit that conditional necessity has to be interpreted in a *temporal* (or *tensed*) way, i.e., as referring either to the present, the past or the future, like in the case of the traditional “necessity of the present” (whereby it is necessary that, when something exists, it exists). A proposition like “A human being exists” (*homo existit*), if taken in an absolute sense, is contingent, since human beings could not exist (in the case in which all human beings disappear from the earth, the proposition is false). However, if you add a temporal determination, and the same temporal determination, to both the subject and the predicate of the proposition, you will obtain the following proposition: *homo dux existit necessario existit*. The same holds not only in the case of the present time, but also in the case of past or future, with the only caveat that one and the same temporal determination (past, present, or future) must be added to both the subject- and the predicate term.

In this way, Thomasius claims, existence is the true foundation of the conditional necessity of essential propositions: the necessity that we attribute to the essences of creatures is only a hypothetical one, and is not grounded in some

in the nominal sense to potential being in the traditional sense, Thomasius and the young Leibniz are rejecting the very plausibility of Suárez’s operation.

39 To be historically accurate, it must be said that, in calling a pure possible a «purely objective potency» (*potentia objectiva*), Suárez denied that it could be regarded as a real and positive thing. Even though their simple non-repugnancy is what allows the possibles to have an aptitude to exist, such a possibility has always been described by Suárez by means of a double negation, and he never says that the aptitude to exist is an intrinsically positive feature along with the mere non-repugnancy. Other authors, however, were far less cautious on this point, thus asserting that, in addition to the simple absence of contradiction, something positive has to be found in the very possibility of things: see P. Hurtado de Mendoza, *Disputationes Metaphysicae* [in *Disputationes de Universa Philosophia*. Lyon 1617], disp, 8, s.1, §9: «aptitude, or non-repugnance to being, is not a mere negation, but some positive concept (*aptitudo seu non repugnantia ad essendum non est mera negatio: sed conceptus aliquis positivus*)». This and other passages are quoted in Schmutz (1998: 123–125).

potential being abstracted from time, but rather on existence conceived as temporally indexed⁴⁰. When saying that “A human being is an animal” is an eternal truth, one is not appealing for some eternal being (coeternal with God) or some ontologically weakened potential being; its genuine meaning must be understood as indexed to every time determination, i.e., what the tradition called the “total denotation” of a term: something like *Qui fuit homo fuit animal*, and *Qui est homo est animal*, and *Qui erit homo erit animal* (DS I. 6, N. 84, 56). In his preliminary presentation of his solution (N. 52), Thomasius apparently endorses the traditional view that the subject of an essential proposition refers to being in the nominal sense, i.e., making abstraction from time, and, especially, from present time (and the same holds for the copula, which has to be taken *cum praecisione ab omnibus tempore differentiis*).

At the end of his exposition (N. 86), however, he makes it clear that his previous exposition must be qualified in the following way: reference to being in the nominal sense has to be taken not in the broad sense of the Schoolmen, but as restricted to created being only, and, more importantly, as involving actual existence, be it present, past or future. Paradoxical though it may be, Thomasius says that to say that being taken as a name makes abstraction from time (*praescindere ab omni tempore*) just means that it makes abstraction from existence as indexed to the present time; but it can be extended to both past and future existence as well⁴¹. He also adds that, when one says that the copula makes abstraction from any temporal determination, this must be understood in the sense that the copula should range on all the temporal determinations, i.e., past, present, and future. And this is the only acceptable sense in which one can say that the copula ranges on what is possible (where “possible”, of course, refers to what was, is, or will be actual; see DS I. 6, N. 88, 59).

2.6. Necessity, Essentialism, and Some Open Questions

There is a last point in Thomasius’ account that needs to be highlighted. It concerns the distinction between two different kinds of “hypothetical necessity” that can be ascribed to created beings. The first one is the necessity of

40 On the connection between existence (existential propositions) and time in the mature Leibniz, see Chapter 8 below.

41 As E. J. Ashworth points out, however, in the post-medieval discussion it was not uncommon to assume that a proposition like “A human being is an animal” is true *ex hypothesi*, i.e., given that «the course of nature instituted by God does not change and the copula is absolved from time only in the sense that all times are denoted indifferently» (Ashworth 1974: 88). She adds also that the reading of “abstraction from time” as the fact that the copula refers to no time at all was typically rejected by nominalist authors. As in the case of Thomasius, some authors claimed that the idea that such propositions were eternally true arose from Aristotle’s assumption that the world was eternal. Thus, Thomasius’ position seems to be in keeping with those nominalist authors who wanted to provide an extensional interpretation of necessary propositions.

existence, which everyone takes as hypothetical (like in the case of the proposition: *homo existens, quando existit, necessario existit*). The main difference is that the necessity of existence can only be applied to accidental propositions, that are those in which the subject refers to something contingent and the connection between the subject and the predicate is a contingent one as well, like in the proposition “A human being is learned” (*homo est doctus*), which can be taken as necessary only when read as “A human being, when he is learned, is learned” (*homo, quando est doctus, est doctus*).

On the other hand, the necessity of essence takes place only in the field of essential propositions, i.e., those in which, even if the subject refers to something which does not necessarily exist, the connection between the subject and the predicate is nevertheless a necessary one. In this case, for the necessity of the connection to be exhibited it is not necessary to place the predicate within the subject term (like when *homo est doctus* is read as *homo doctus est doctus*, i.e., “A human being, when learned, is (necessarily) learned”); in the case of an essential proposition like “A human being is an animal” (*homo est animal*), the correct analysis is *qui est homo, est animal* rather than *homo, quando est animal, est animal*. In the case of accidental propositions, it is possible to conceive the connection of the subject with the opposite of the predicate without contradiction, while in the case of essential propositions this can never happen. In the first case, the necessity at work is only a necessity *de sensu composito*, i.e., *de dicto* necessity. In the case of essential propositions, on the other hand, one would be tempted to say that the necessity has to be interpreted as a *de re* necessity.

On this point, however, Thomasius seems to be very hesitant. He says only that the necessity of essential propositions is “less impure” than that of accidental ones and that the former can be called “absolute” only if compared to the latter. He immediately points out, however, that a proposition like “A human being is an animal” must be taken as necessary and universal *as if* it were true in virtue of its own nature (*quasi ex vi suae naturae*, DS I.6, N. 94, 62). Essential propositions can be said to be absolutely necessary only if compared to accidental propositions, while, when compared to God (who is the only absolutely necessary being), they must be taken as necessary only in a hypothetical sense.

This sort of hypothetical necessity (hypothetical *simpliciter* and absolute only *secundum quid*) is sufficient to ground the knowledge (*scientia*) of created beings. Those who think that the proper object of science is the possible being of creatures, however, would be dissatisfied with this interpretation of essential propositions. Against the latter, Thomasius points out that, even if you ascribe necessity to being taken as possible (or being *nominaliter sumptum*), the problem of the foundation of science would not be solved at all: (1) because “possible being” is no being at all, but only non-being (and there is no science of non-being; see DS I. 7, *Non-entis nulla est scientia*); (2) because the very same necessity which is guaranteed by the non-repugnance of terms can be extended

to accidental connections as well, so that it would turn out that, at the level of pure possibility, it is as necessary that “A human being is an animal” as that “A human being is white” (cf. DS I. 6, N. 96, 63).

Point (1) is only a repetition of Thomasius’ criticism of potential being. Point (2), by contrast, is more interesting since it deals with a delicate question which will be important for Leibniz as well. Thomasius quotes approvingly what Fonseca says about those who maintain that propositions like “A human being is an animal” are necessary *simpliciter* insofar as they are understood as ranging over possible beings (*secundum esse possibile*). Fonseca explains that two interpretations of this claim are available: the proposition *homo est animal* should be read as *homo est animal possibile*, which could be interpreted either (a) as *homo potest esse animal*, or (b) as if a human being’s being an animal could exist *in rerum natura*⁴². The latter reading (b) is a sort of existential reading of possibility and presents no problem, whereas the former (a) faces the problem raised in point (2) above, i.e., that the same necessity seems to be applicable to both essential and accidental propositions⁴³. When defending the meaningfulness of the distinction between accidental and essential predication, Thomasius seems to be interested in preserving the core of traditional essentialism. In his view, the traditional distinction between essential and accidental predication can be preserved in a philosophical framework dominated by a strong sympathy for nominalism⁴⁴. He insists that it is the supporter of a realist, or moderately realist, view of possible

42 Cf. P. Fonseca, *Commentariorum P. Fonsecae in Libros Metaphysicorum Aristotelis*, Lugduni 1593, tome II, book V, ch. 5, q. 1, 321c. Incidentally, one can observe that point (b) corresponds to Ockham’s characterization of what is possible; see *Ordinatio* I, dist. 43, q. 2: «Nor is it a proper way of speaking to say that “to be possible” belongs to a creature; rather, it should more properly be said that the creature is possible, not because of anything that belongs to it, but because it can exist in the realm of things (*Nec est proprius modus loquendi dicere quod esse possibile convenit creaturae, sed magis proprie debet dici quod creatura est possibilis, non propter aliquid quod sibi conveniat sed quia potest esse in rerum natura*)» (Ockham 1967: 650). Ockham’s aim is to state that to be possible is not something that creatures receive from God as a principle (*principiative*) as in Scotus’ theory of the production of creatures in the intelligible being (*esse intelligibile*).

43 The same difficulty is raised by Gassendi against Descartes’ theory of essences in the *Fifth Meditation*. Gassendi reduces Descartes’ view to that of the Schoolmen, according to which the natures of things are eternal and eternally true propositions can be stated about them; this is a conclusion he cannot accept because «it is impossible to grasp how there can be a human nature if no human being exists, or how we can say that a rose is a flower when not even a rose exists». Then, Gassendi adds the following remark: «since the proposition “Man is animal” has no greater necessity than the proposition “Plato is a man”, it follows that even the latter proposition will have eternal truth, and the individual essence of Plato will be just as independent of God as the universal essence of man» (AT VII: 319–320/CSM II: 222). In answer to this objection, Descartes will explicitly refer to his theory of the creation of eternal truths; see also P. Gassendi, *Disquisitio Metaphysica*, Amsterdam 1644: 236–238.

44 One should remember that the nominalist tradition was able to maintain the distinction between essential and accidental predication and, thus, endorse a form of essentialism that was sufficient to provide the ground for Aristotelian science; see, for instance, Klima (2005); cf. also Panaccio (2023).

beings, who cannot avoid the conclusion that such a distinction is pointless, or, at least, that essential and accidental predication, being both necessary in the same way, cannot be distinguished from the modal point of view.

This problem can be detected in an author like Suárez, especially when he deals with God's knowledge of what is possible, or, as it was usually called at that time, God's *scientia simplicis intelligentiae*, which is presupposed to God's knowledge of actual beings (*scientia visionis*). God's knowledge of the possible is an abstractive science (in the sense of making abstraction from the actual existence of things), and, insofar as it takes merely possible beings as its objects, is also *absolutely necessary*, for the very possibility of creatures is a necessary one: «Moreover, knowledge, insofar as it is directed toward possible things, is simply necessary, because the possibility of creatures is necessary (*Est autem scientia, ut terminatur ad res posibles, simpliciter necessaria, quia possibilitas creaturarum necessaria est*)»⁴⁵. Here Suárez explicitly states that God's knowledge of what is possible is necessary *simpliciter* because its object is a necessary one. And it could not be otherwise, because Suárez himself remarks that the necessary status of that science must be modelled on the necessary status of its objects (cf. also DM VII, v, 5). If what is possible is necessarily so, it would be extremely difficult, however, to find a place for contingency at the level of bare possibility, and existence would then constitute the only contingent aspect of created things. When dealing with Leibniz's mature view on the possibles, he himself will be at pains to reconcile the need to find a place for contingency within the realm of what is possible on the one hand, and the necessary (and necessitating) character of God's *scientia simplicis intelligentiae* on the other.

45 F. Suárez, *De Divina Substantia*, III, 4, n. 2 (Vivès, I, 207a).

Chapter 3. Existence and Hypothetical Truths in the Young Leibniz (1663-1672)

3.1. Metaphysics as a System of Hypothetical Truths

One of the most interesting aspects of Leibniz's early philosophy concerns his own positive account of eternal truths (the same topic discussed by Thomasius in the text discussed in the previous chapter). The issue of the eternal truths was placed at the heart of Leibniz's early metaphysical reflections, as shown by the following passage of his remarks on D. Stahl's handbook:

Metaphysics, i.e., First Philosophy, is a *System of Theorems*. A *theorem* is a proposition that would be true even if nothing existed, i.e., a proposition that is only hypothetical or can be resolved into hypothetical ones. First philosophy has been defined in this way by Honoratus Fabri, whose *Scientia Rationum Universalium* has been edited by Mosnerius, and Thomas Hobbes, who divided his work *De Corpore* in two parts, i.e., First Philosophy, abstracted from existence, and Physics, which concerns the cause of things which are in the world. Metaphysics is the work of bare *reason* and flows from definitions. The foundations of Physics, on the other hand, are posited by *sense*. (ca. 1663–64, A VI 1: 22)

This is a very interesting passage, for several reasons. First, it shows that the young Leibniz understands metaphysics neither as the science of being *qua* being nor as the science of “real being” (*essentia realis*), but, rather, as a system of propositions that can be demonstrated, i.e., theorems, which ultimately consist in hypothetical propositions or are reducible to hypothetical ones. Notice that Leibniz seems to be particularly eager to stress the conditional nature of those propositions and, apparently, he does not share Thomasius' dissatisfaction with the hypothetical reading of necessary and essential propositions. This should hardly be surprising, however, at least if one thinks that Leibniz has always been interested in the logic of hypothetical reasoning and, especially, the classification and treatment of conditionals, as is clearly shown by his early works on the logic of juridical reasoning.

For instance, in his 1665 *Disputatio Juridica de Conditionibus*, he refers to the class of conditional propositions – those which would be true even if all the things in the world were annihilated – as to “abstract” propositions, in contrast with the class of those propositions which, on the other hand, are true only of what is actual¹.

1 Cf. *De Conditionibus* (1665), §18, A VI 1: 103; see also *De Doctrina Conditionum* (1669), A VI 1: 373. On this topic, see Schepers (1973); Ishiguro (1982); On Leibniz's juridical theory of

A second interesting point is that the traditional distinction between essential and existential propositions is explicitly rephrased in terms of the distinction between the abstract and the concrete. The hypothetical nature, moreover, of the “eternal truths” (which constitute the object of metaphysics) is not traced back to the authority of the Schoolmen, but is invoked through reference to the works of two of the *philosophi novi*, i.e., the French Jesuit Honoré Fabri’s *Metaphysica Demonstrativa, sive Scientia Rationum Universalium*, edited in Lyon in 1648 by his disciple Pierre Mousnier², and, especially, Thomas Hobbes’ highly influential book *De Corpore* (1655).

As I will show in what follows, Hobbes’ *De corpore* is one of the most important sources to understand several tenets of Leibniz’s earlier philosophy.³ For the time being, let me just focus on the fact that Leibniz here expressly mentions the distinction established by Hobbes between the first philosophy (which correspond to the second part of *De Corpore*) and the physics (which corresponds to the third and the fourth parts of the book), emphasizing the fact that Hobbes’ metaphysics, being a mere rational science that can be drawn from definitions, makes abstraction from existence; on the other hand, existence and the investigation of the true causes of actually existing things, is delegated to physics. One might venture to say that, according to the young Leibniz, the hypothesis of the annihilation of the world, which Hobbes places at the beginning of his metaphysics, has replaced the Scholastic thought experiment meant to prove that essential propositions would remain true even if everything (God included) but the thinking subject were to be annihilated.

Finally, it must be stressed that the distinction between metaphysics and physics (or the abstract and the concrete) is ultimately grounded in the distinction between reason and sensibility (*sensus*). Such a distinction will play a fundamental role in Leibniz’s characterization of existence in terms of sense perception, as I will show. But this dualism finds its origin in Hobbes’ epistemological thesis that sense perception is at the basis of every form of knowledge, and especially of Hobbes’ emphasis on the *unconditional* characters of perception vs. the hypothetical (or *conditional*) character of rational knowledge.

The latter point is clearly stated in the following passage from the *Leviathan*:

There are of “knowledge” two kinds, whereof one is “knowledge of fact”; the other, “knowledge of the consequence of one affirmation to another”. The former is nothing else but sense and memory, and is “absolute knowledge”; as when we see a fact doing, or remember it done; and this is the knowledge required in a

conditions, one can also refer to Armgardt (2001) and Thiercelin (2009).

2 On Fabri’s life and works (and his connections with Leibniz), see Caruso (1987: 85–126); cf. Palmerino (2008); see also Chapter 6 below.

3 Cf. the essays included in: Marquer-Rateau (2017), especially M. Schneider’s posthumous paper (Schneider 2017); but see too the seminal paper by Di Bella (1998).

witness. The latter is called “science”, and is “conditional”; as when we know that: “if the figure shown be a circle, then any straight line through the centre shall divide it into two equal parts”. And this is the knowledge required in a philosopher; that is to say, of him that pretends to reasoning⁴.

On the basis of this distinction between rational and factual knowledge, Hobbes distinguishes philosophy, or the kind of knowledge “required in a philosopher”, from history (natural as well as civil), which is mentioned as the main field of factual knowledge in the continuation of the passage quoted above. The same distinction is implicitly recalled in the definition of philosophy placed at the beginning of *De Corpore* (I, 2) where both sense and memory are excluded from the kind of knowledge Hobbes ascribes to philosophy.

Such a distinction is implicitly at work in a fundamental passage from the DAC, where the young Leibniz excludes singular propositions from the domain of his combinatory art, which has to do only with “theorems”, i.e., propositions having eternal truth: «I must finally draw attention to the fact that this whole art of complication is directed towards theorems, or propositions that are eternally true, that is, propositions that hold not because of the will of GOD, but by their very nature» (§83, A VI 1: 199 or GP IV 69/DAC 177).

On the other hand, singular propositions, among which Leibniz mentions historical ones (such as, “Augustus was emperor of the Romans”), as well as observations, i.e., general propositions whose truth is grounded not in essence but in existence, are said to be true «as if by chance – that is by the will of God (*quasi casu, id est Dei arbitrio*)» (*Ibidem*)⁵. Among the general observations, Leibniz includes propositions like “All adult men in Europe have cognisance of God”, of which there is no demonstration properly speaking, but only induction; or, at least, sometimes they can be proven by means of other observations plus the intervention of some theorems⁶.

4 T. Hobbes, *Leviathan*, London 1651, Ch. IX (EW III: 71).

5 According to this passage, contingent propositions (singular ones and empirical generalizations) are grounded in actual existence, i.e., on the will of God. Of course, this does not mean that the existence of things entirely depends on God’s arbitrary will, even though, as has been pointed out, Leibniz in this period was not completely free from some voluntarist strand, as in the case of his partial appraisal of Thrasymachus’ definition of justice as “the interest of the stronger”, where, however, Leibniz claims that only God, being omnipotent, can be regarded as the stronger: see A VI 1: 230. A voluntarist period in the young Leibniz has been identified by Mormino (2006: 24–36). For a different interpretation, see Rateau (2019: 23–28).

6 Cf. Leibniz’s classification of propositions (singular, necessary, and contingently universal, i.e., based on induction and observation) in §32 of the first part of the *Nova Methodus* (A VI 1: 284 /L 88). General observations can be proven by means of a combination of theorems and other observations. Leibniz sometimes refers to these as “mixed truths”, a sort of intermediate case between truths of reason and truths of fact. They are explicitly mentioned in a letter to M. Hesenthaler, 1671, A II 1²: 188–190; cf. Mugnai (2001: 81–84). Extensive

3.2 Singular Propositions and Existence in the *Dissertatio de Arte Combinatoria*

From this distinction between knowledge in the strong sense and historical observations, Leibniz draws the confirmation of the Aristotelian claim that there is no science of individual things (*scientia non est de singularibus*):

Accordingly, it is clear in what sense it may be said of singular propositions that no demonstration is possible, and why that most profound man Aristotle treated the places (*loci*) of the arguments in his *Topics*, where propositions are contingent and arguments probable. Yet there is only one place for demonstrations, namely, in definition. But when it comes to what can be said of a thing that does not follow from its inner being, for example, that Christ was born in Bethlehem, nobody will arrive at it by means of definitions: rather, history will furnish the matter [...]. (§84, A VI 1: 199 or GP IV 69–70/DAC 177–179)⁷

Among the many consequences that can be derived from this position, one consequence in particular needs to be emphasized here: the exclusion of existence (and the knowledge thereof) from the domain of rational knowledge, i.e., analytical science based on definitions and demonstrations (which are nothing but chains of definitions for Leibniz). Since (actual) existence pertains only to singular beings, and demonstrations deal only with abstract essences and connections between essences (or, better still, essential propositions), it follows that propositions concerning existence are to be placed among the truths of fact and, as such, they cannot be analytically derived from the nature of things. This suggestion finds further confirmations in what Leibniz says in the corollaries he adds to the DAC. The first corollary under the heading of “Logic”, in fact, says:

There are two primary propositions. The first is the principle of all *theorems or necessary propositions*: *what is (so) either is or is not (so), or conversely*. The other is the basis of all observations or contingent propositions: *something exists* (*Daue sunt propositiones primae, una principium omnium theorematum seu propositionum necessarium: Quod est (tale) id est seu non est (tale) vel contra; altera omnium observationum seu propositionum contingentium: Aliquid existit*). (A VI 1: 228n or GP IV 41n/L 74)⁸

considerations on the limits of induction are contained in Leibniz’s *Preface to Nizolius* (1670), A VI 2: 431–432/L 129–130.

- 7 Reference to Aristotle’s *Topics* is not without importance in this context, because Leibniz’s encyclopaedic project consists of two parts, the *ars iudicandi* (corresponding to analytic science) and the *ars inveniendi*, which corresponds to the topic of the passage above, especially as far as the study of relations is concerned. Compare §85 of the DAC with §§24–25 of the *Nova Methodus Discendae Docendaeque Jurisprudendae* (1667), A VI 1: 279; see Di Bella (2005a: 41–43), and, especially, the chapter on topics and combinatorial art in Picon (2021: 107–132); see also Piro (1990, Ch.1); Varani (1995); Meier–Kunz (1996).
- 8 Cf. also *De Conditionibus* (1669), §48: «This division between determined and undetermined propositions is like that between *theorems*, i.e., propositions true because of their terms, and *observations*, i.e., propositions true because of sensation or induction: the former are

In a sense, Leibniz's inclination to consider existence as a very peculiar property of things, that is, one that cannot be on a par with all the other predicates that can be ascribed to a subject, originates from this very early intuition of his. On the other hand, contingent and individual features of things, which the DAC excludes from the domain of analytic knowledge, will be included by Leibniz in his account of substance in terms of complete individual concepts⁹. After all, a complete concept is nothing but something from which the whole history of an individual can be analytically derived (at least by God)¹⁰. In that case, however, the complete concept of an individual is not just the (theological) counterpart of the ontological subject of the DAC, but also constitutes an individual essence, i.e., one in which both essential and accidental (or existential or contingent) predicates must be contained¹¹. Of course, this twofold aspect of the complete concept will represent the main reason for Leibniz's many oscillations about the notion of existence.

It will be hardly surprising, then, to discover that in these early texts there is no attempt at providing something like a definition, or an *a priori* characterization of existence, while one can find, by contrast, many texts in which Leibniz deals with what we would call an epistemic characterization of existence,

propositions of reason (for instance, "the whole is greater [than the sum] of its parts"), the latter are propositions of fact (for instance, "there is a world"), like all the historical propositions» (A VI 1: 398).

- 9 At the same time, however, even if existential or contingent properties, for the mature Leibniz, must be included in the complete concept of an individual (given the universality of the conceptual containment theory of truth), it is also true that he will maintain that existential or contingent propositions will not be provable or demonstrable in a proper sense (i.e., in a finite number of steps), because they involve the infinite. According to the (in)famous theory of contingency based on infinite analysis, in the case of such propositions, even God is able to see the inclusion of the predicate in the subject only through an act of intuition, but cannot prove it in a demonstrative way. Cf. Chapter 8 below.
- 10 As M. Fichant has observed, names of individuals like Alexander and Julius Caesar exemplify Leibniz's account of the complete concept in the *Discourse on Metaphysics*: «[...] il serait tentant de conclure que les substances individuelles du *Discours de métaphysique* sont les acteurs du champ historique» (Fichant 2004: 57).
- 11 The association between existential properties and accidental ones (as opposed to essential properties) is stated by Leibniz in several passages of this mature period, cf. *New Essays*, IV, ix, §1 (A VI 6: 433); see also LH IV, 7C, Bl. 82, after 1691: «Essence is the principle of those [properties] which belong to a thing by itself. Existence is the principle of those [properties] which belong to a thing by accident. And in this sense, one usually distinguishes between the essence and the existence of things, that is, between the idea of a thing and the state in which that thing is found (*Essentia est principium eorum quae rei competunt per se. Existentia est principium eorum quae rei competunt per accidens. Atque hoc sensu solet distingui inter essentiam rerum atque existentiam; inter rei ideam, et statum in quo reperitur*)». In these texts, "essence" has to be taken in the traditional sense, i.e., as referring to general essences (species, genera), not to individual ones. The complete individual concept involves both existential properties and essential properties in the traditional sense: «The complete concept is the principle of all properties (*Conceptus completus est principium omnium*)» (LH IV, 7C, Bl. 82); cf. also Grua 354; A VI 4: 1600.

according to which existence is equivalent to what can be sensed in a distinct way. Before discussing the details of Leibniz's epistemic or phenomenological account of existence, however, there is still something important to say about those "theorems" or propositions having "eternal truth", which, according to the young Leibniz, constitute the object of metaphysics itself.

In a passage from one of the many drafts concerning the project of the *Elementa Juris Naturalis*, dated to around 1670–71, Leibniz writes:

The doctrine of right belongs to those sciences which depend on definitions and not on experience, and on demonstration of reason and not of sense; they are problems of law, so to speak, not of fact (*juris, non facti*). For since justice consists in a kind of congruity and proportionality, we can understand that something is just even if there is no one who practices it or upon whom it is practiced. Just so the relations of numbers are true even if there were no one to count and nothing to be counted, and we can predict that a house will be beautiful, a machine efficient, or a commonwealth happy, if it comes to being, even if it should never do so. We need not wonder, therefore, that the principles of those sciences possess eternal truth. For they are all conditional truths (*conditionalia*) and treat not of what does exist but of what follows if existence be assumed. They are not derived from sense but from a clear and distinct intuition (*imaginatio*), which Plato called an idea, and which, when expressed in words, is the same as a definition. That which can be understood clearly, however, is not always true, though it is always possible; and it is also true, in addition, whenever the only question is that of possibility. But whenever there is a question of necessity, there is also one of possibility, for if we call something necessary, we deny the possibility of its opposite. It therefore suffices to demonstrate the necessary connections between things and their consequences in this way: by deducing them from a clear and distinct intuition (that is, when it is expressed in words, a definition), through a continuous series of definitions which imply them; that is, through a demonstration. (A VI 1: 460–461/L 133)

This long quotation presents a remarkable synthesis of many aspects of Leibniz's early account of eternal truths. First, Leibniz repeats that (a) scientific knowledge (*scientia*) rests on definitions and not on experience, and this is why certain propositions (like those of mathematics) can be true even if there are no existent things corresponding to their subjects (nothing to be counted, for instance); this can be explained, secondly, by (b) the conditional nature of such truths, for they deal not with what exists but with what would follow once existence has been assumed. Thirdly, (c) these truths are said to be derived not from sensible intuition but from a "clear and distinct *imagination*", which can be called an "idea" in the Platonic sense, and that, when expressed in words (i.e., in a propositional form), can be called a definition. Fourthly, (d) concerning the modal status of these propositions, Leibniz points out that the question concerns the necessity of the connection between things and their consequences,

which can be proved by deducing them from a definition through a “continuous series of definitions which imply them” – such is Leibniz’s standard account of the nature of a demonstration. The most interesting point here, however, is the latter’s connection with an epistemic account of modality, viz., the characterization of the possible as whatever can be clearly and distinctly understood.

In particular, concerning (a) the conditional nature of eternal truths, Leibniz seems to part ways with Thomasius’ account. As noted in the previous chapter, Thomasius’ rejection of attributing a conditional structure to these propositions was probably motivated by his preference for an extensional interpretation of essential propositions, and also by his fear that the conditional reading could be interpreted as promoting an ontological commitment to intensional entities like *possibilia*, which Thomasius could never accept. The young Leibniz, by contrast, seems to prefer the conditional reading of essential propositions, while, at the same time, rejecting any ontological commitment to entities like possible beings. In the DAC and in other places, the young Leibniz mentions a way of paraphrasing propositions which looks very similar to a strategy adopted by Thomasius. Whereas Thomasius used it to make sense of the true logical structure of necessary and essential propositions, Leibniz, however, explicitly restricts its use to the case of singular propositions such as “Socrates is a son of Sophroniscus”, which is interpreted accordingly as “Whoever is Socrates, is a son of Sophroniscus” (§24, A VI 1: 182 or GP IV 50–51/DAC 113).

This way of paraphrasing propositions was attributed by Leibniz to an obscure seventeenth-century German logician, Johannes Raue (or Ravius, in the Latin form). Raue’s analysis of predication has been accounted for by Ignacio Angelelli¹². The core of this analysis concerns the way the function of the copula is understood in cases of propositions like “A human being is an animal” or “Peter is a human being”. Both the subject- and the predicate-term (*S* and *P*) are replaced by sentences introduced by a relative pronoun, like (in Latin) *id quod est S* and *id quod est P*, so that the true form of a proposition of the form *S est P* is something like *id, quod est S, est id, quod est P*, where the true copula is only the one placed in the middle, i.e., that which connects the two complex items *id quod est S* and *id quod est P*. This real copula is always expressed in the present tense, while the other two auxiliary copulas can express the *differentiae temporis*. As Angelelli points out, for a contemporary reader, the most interesting aspect of this strategy is the similarity between Raue’s and Frege’s analysis of propositions, because Raue «emphasizes that *S*, the subject [...] is predicated of the *tertium commune* just as the predicate *P* [the *tertium commune* being the third entity underlying both *S* and *P*, to which both of them refer]»¹³.

12 See Angelelli (1990). See Nuchelmans (1986: 225), where he traces this analysis of propositions back to Paul of Venice’s *Logica Magna*. Cf. also Nuchelmans (1980: 62–64).

13 Angelelli (1990: 188).

What is particularly important is the kind of restriction that Leibniz applies to the range of propositions that can be paraphrased in this way, introducing a distinction between propositions *per se* and propositions *per accidens*. This style of paraphrasis is applicable only to the case of propositions *per accidens*. Indeed, Leibniz elsewhere draws attention to the fact that whereas it is correct to say that “Every human being is rational”, a proposition like “Every human being is white” would be misleading if expressed in this form. Even if it is actually the case that every human being on earth is white, that does not mean that “whiteness” immediately pertains to “humanity”. The correct way of expressing that fact would instead be something like *omnis qui est homo, est albus* (“Whoever is a human being, is white”)¹⁴. Leibniz applies Raue’s analysis not only to the case of singular propositions but also to the class of general propositions whose truth is not based on essence (i.e., on conceptual connections) but which are true “almost by chance” as he remarked in the passage from DAC quoted above.

It should be clear by now why Leibniz cannot accept Thomasius’ extensional reading of essential propositions, but chose to restrict the range of its application to the field of propositions of fact. This does not mean, however, that this move compels him to a further ontological commitment to a domain of non-actual entities. As clarified in point (b) above, Leibniz specifies that eternal truths have a conditional nature exactly because they deal with what follows once the existence of things has been assumed. This reading is confirmed by what Leibniz says in another draft concerning the element of natural laws, where he writes: «“To be understood” means that [one] has a place among things, that which is the case, that which is possible [...] For we call “possible” whatever is understood in a clear and distinct way, and there is no other criterion of possibility [...] available to humankind but existence itself» (A VI 1: 473). Speaking of existence as the only criterion of possibility available to human beings, he says that he will treat this issue elsewhere (*de quo alibi*). I will revisit this issue myself in the chapters that follow.

3.3. Hobbes’ Analysis of Predication and Its Ontological Consequences

For the time being, suffice it to point out that the very distinction between propositions *per se* and propositions *per accidens* is a quotation from a similar distinction made by Hobbes in chapter III of his *De Corpore*. There, Hobbes distinguished between necessary and contingent propositions in the following way: a proposition like “A human being is an animal” is necessarily true because, at any time we suppose the name “human being” be attributed to something, also the name “animal” will be attributed to the same thing. Hobbes explicitly refers to time as well as conceivability in his account of what counts as a necessary proposition.

14 Cf. A VI 1: 520. But see also *De Lingua Philosophica*, 1687–88, A VI 4: 889.

A proposition is necessary «when no thing can be conceived or imagined at any time whose name is the subject without the name of that same thing also being the *predicate* (*quando nulla res concipi potest sive fingi ullo tempore, cujus nomen sit subjectum, quin ejusdem nomen sit etiam praedicatum*)» (*De Corpore* III, 10; OL I: 33–34). According to this account, both the subject and the predicate of a proposition are taken as names of the same thing, following the account of propositions given by Hobbes in Chapter III, 2, where he stated that a proposition is a speech consisting of two names connected by a copula, by means of which people take the latter name (the predicate) to be the name of the same thing of which the former (the subject) is the name, or, which, is the same, the former (subject) is contained in the latter (predicate). Even though Hobbes generally privileges the extensional reading (inclusion of the subject in the predicate), it has been remarked that, in his discussion of necessary propositions, he seems to accept a sort of intensional reading of containment: «in every necessary proposition, the predicate is either equivalent to the subject, as in the proposition “A human being is a rational animal”, or is part of an equivalent name, as in the propositions “A human being is an animal”» (III, 10; OL I: 34); for the name “rational animal” is composed of two names, and, thus, the correct analysis should be “A rational animal is an animal”, or something like that¹⁵.

A contingent proposition, on the other hand, is one that can be true at one time and false at another, like “Every crow is black”. Unlike what happens with necessary propositions, the predicate in the case of contingent propositions cannot be regarded as part of the compounded name which is equivalent to the subject-name, and this is the main reason why these propositions are contingent. These propositions correspond to those which Leibniz calls propositions *per accidens* and to which he applies the kind of paraphrase modelled on Raue’s analysis of the copula.

At the end of the same paragraph of Chapter III 10, Hobbes adds another very interesting remark:

From this, it is also clear that truth does not pertain to things but to speech only: there are, indeed, some truths which are eternal, for it will be eternally true that *if it is a man, it is an animal*, but it is not necessary that man or animal should exist eternally. (*De Corpore*, III 10; OL I: 34)

In this passage, Hobbes anticipates what he will say in the following paragraph, i.e., the equivalence and mutual convertibility between necessary propositions and hypothetical ones, and also points out that, in the case of eternal or necessary truths, the truth in question does not pertain to the thing (there is

15 Cf. Di Bella (2005a: 49): «an unmistakable intensional reading of containment is put forward, when Hobbes deals with necessary propositions»; see also 47–54 for a very interesting account of Hobbes’ treatment of necessary propositions.

no such thing as an ontology of eternal truths) but to the linguistic dimension only. To understand this point, one must briefly recall Hobbes' criticism of traditional ontology, which can be found in his unpublished work written as a criticism of Thomas White's *De Mundo*, the so-called *Anti-White* (or, also, *De Motu, Loco, et Tempore*)¹⁶.

Concerning the distinction between essence and existence, Hobbes writes that "to exist" has exactly the same meaning of "to be" (*esse*) or, which is the same, "to be an entity" (*esse ens*). This does not mean that there is no distinction between the predicative and the existential use of the copula; as Hobbes notes, however, the difference between the predicative and the existential use of *esse* is not enough to justify the claim that existence and essence are truly distinct items: «The reason why our metaphysicians have regarded essence and existence as different, seems to be the fact that they have not distinguished what follows from the essences (*essentiarum consequentias*) and essences themselves» (*Anti-White*, XVIII, 5: 335). In a proposition like "A human being is an animal", "to be an animal" (*esse animal*) follows, and will eternally follow, from "to be a human being" (*esse hominem*); thus, it is eternally true that "A human being is an animal". This fact has been regarded by the metaphysicians as evidence of the fact that essences (even when abstracted from actual existence) are eternal. This claim led the metaphysicians to conclude that *esse* and *existere* must be really distinct, for the existence of things is not eternal.

Emphasizing the non-existential import of eternal truths, Hobbes also stresses the prohibition of moving from a necessity internal to the proposition itself to a real necessity "in things" (i.e., from a *de dicto* to a *de re* reading of necessity). For Hobbes, a proposition like "A human being is an animal" says something about the meaning of the term "human being", not about the existence of human beings:

This is the reason why the truth that can be demonstrated is the truth of consequences, and in every demonstration the name (*vox*) which is taken as the subject of the conclusion that has been demonstrated, has to be taken as a name not of an existent thing, but only of a supposed one, and the conclusion has not a categorical, but only a hypothetical strength. For instance, if you have demonstrated a certain property about the triangle, it is not necessary that a triangle exists, but only that it is hypothetically true that, if a triangle exists, it has that property. *On the contrary, if you want to prove that something exists, sensation is required, that is experience. Even in that case, however, one does not properly demonstrate it: indeed, if someone would strictly demand the truth from someone else who claims that Socrates lives or exists, he will prescribe him to add the constraint that, if he has not seen a spectre, or a phantasm or he has not dreamed, then he has seen Socrates, and, then, Socrates exists.* (*Anti-White*, XXVI, 2: 308–309, italics mine)

16 I will refer to the Latin text in Hobbes (1973). The title *De Motu, Loco et Tempore* is used in the Italian translation of this work by G. Paganini (Hobbes 2016).

This passage is worth considering for two reasons. First, it specifies a point that will become pervasive in Leibniz's early account of existence: once existence has been placed among those aspects that cannot be derived from the nature of things but only ascertained moving from sensible experience, the main question is not that of providing a correct definition of existence (which would be impossible) but, rather, that of providing a set of criteria to distinguish between reality and dreams, or, as Leibniz will say, between real phenomena and imaginary ones. Secondly, this passage explains the further step taken by Hobbes with respect to the traditional distinction between essence and existence. After all, the claim that necessary truths have no existential import was a sort of commonplace among the Schoolmen, but this did not prevent (some of) them from attributing another kind of being to essences. Hobbes, indeed, wants to sever the link the tradition had usually acknowledged between eternal truths and essences: from the necessity of eternal truths neither the eternity of essences nor their reality follows, even when "reality" is to be distinguished from actual existence.

When considered apart from actual existence, essences amount to nothing other than «a linking of terms by means of the verb is (*nominum copulationem per verbum est*)»; so goes Hobbes objection to Descartes' recovery of essences in the *Fifth Meditation*:

And hence essence without existence is a mental fiction. It seems that essence is to existence as the mental image of a man is to a man; or the essence of Socrates is to the existence of Socrates as the proposition "Socrates is a man" is to the proposition "Socrates is, or exists". Now, when Socrates does not exist, the proposition "Socrates is a man" signifies merely a linking of terms; and "is" or "to be" carries the image of the unity of a thing to which two terms are applied. (*Third Objections*, AT VII: 194/CSM II: 136)

Here the connection between the two abovementioned aspects of Hobbes' theory, i.e., the rejection of any real distinction between essence and existence and the reduction of essence to a connection of names by means of the copula, is stated very clearly. Hobbes' remark in the last part of the passage above (where he explains that "Socrates is a man" as free of existential import just means a linkage of terms and the copula «carries just the image of the unity of a thing to which two terms are applied») echoes the account of propositions given in *De Corpore*.

Now, it is time to see that this account of propositions perfectly matches with Hobbes' logico-ontological programme of dispensing with abstract terms. In the passage from the *Anti-White* mentioned above, Hobbes employs the apparently bizarre infinitive forms "to be a human being" (*esse hominem*) and "to be an animal" (*esse animal*). Hobbes' aim is a reductionist one, for him every kind of predication is predication of the accidents of some being, which amounts to the collapse

of the traditional distinction between essential and accidental predication¹⁷. This task is accomplished through linguistic analysis, especially the analysis of predication which shows that abstract terms are entirely reducible to concrete predicates: for instance, “whiteness” can be reduced to “to be white”, as well as “humanity” can be reduced to “to be a human being”, and so on. The deflationary account of the copula (regarded as the bare sign of identity between the thing denominated by the subject and that denominated by the predicate) is also functional to the rejection of any ontological interpretation of predication.

In *De Corpore*, the discussion of abstract terms is placed in the chapter on propositions, just because Hobbes’ point is that abstract terms have a derivative nature with respect to predication: “concrete”, Hobbes says, is the name of any thing which we take as existing and, therefore, we call it a *subjectum* or *suppositum*; “abstract”, on the other hand, is that which in any subject denotes the cause of our imposing a concrete name to that thing. Among the concrete terms, for instance, Hobbes includes “body”, “cold”, and “Appius”, whereas the corresponding abstract terms are, respectively, “to be a body” (*esse corpus*), “to be cold” (*esse frigidum*), and “to be Appius” (*esse Appium*). These infinitive forms, however, are not “abstract names”, since abstract names are only the corresponding adjectives used as nouns, as in the case of “corporeity”, “coldness” or “Appiety”. The latter distinction may seem to be irrelevant, but is a fundamental one: while abstractions in the infinitive form play an important and, perhaps, unavoidable role – i.e., they denote the cause of the corresponding concrete name –, abstract names, on the other hand, when taken in their referential form (as if they were the names of some real entity) are just deceptive, an illegitimate reification of fictional entities, which is the main error that Hobbes detects in the works of metaphysicians like White and Descartes¹⁸.

From this misunderstanding follows the origin of expressions like abstract substances or separate essences, as well as the confusion of words derived from the Latin *est*, like *essentia*, *entitas*, *entitativum*, *realitas*, *quidditas* and others (cf. *De Corpore*, III 2; OL I: 27–28). Note that, among the abstract names derived from concrete ones, Hobbes includes also names like *entitas* and *essentia*, whereas *ens* is included among the concrete terms (and implicitly equated with what actually exists). The same conclusion could be drawn about the abstract name *existentia*, for it does not refer to something over and above the class of existing things (that is, beings as such), and, as in the case of other abstract terms, it would be deceptively treated as referring to something in itself¹⁹.

17 My reconstruction of Hobbes’ semantics and ontology is heavily indebted to the following sources: Minerbi Belgrado (1993: 63–105); Pécharman (1992); Nuchelmans (1986: 123–137); Zarka (1987).

18 On the Hobbesian analysis of abstract terms, see especially Di Bella (1998: 243–249).

19 The distinction between *ens* and *esse* corresponds to that between the domain of actually existing objects (i.e., bodies, given Hobbes’ materialism) and the reasons why we impose concrete names

3.4 Leibniz and the Hobbesian Framework: The *Preface to Nizolius*

Of course, it is Leibniz himself who emphasizes, in his 1670 *Preface to Nizolius*, the relevance of Hobbes' criticism of the abuse of abstract terms in philosophy. He also explicitly endorses Hobbes' programme of (almost) completely dispensing with abstract terms in philosophizing:

[I]t appears certain that this passion for devising abstract words has almost obfuscated philosophy for us entirely; we can well enough dispense completely with this procedure in our philosophizing. For concrete are really things; abstractions are not things but modes of things. But modes are usually nothing but the relations of a thing to the understanding, or phenomenal capacities (*apparendi facultates*). Indeed, modes can be repeated to infinity, so that there are qualities of qualities and numbers of numbers. If all these were things, not only infinity but contradiction would result. For if being-ness (*Entitas*) were a being (*Ens*), if real-ness (*Realitas*) were a reality (*res*), if something-ness (*aliquiditas*) were something (*aliquid*), the thing would be the form of itself, or a part of its own concept, which implies a contradiction. If therefore anyone wants to give a perfect exposition of the elements of philosophy, he must abstain from abstract terms almost entirely. (A VI 2: 417 or GP IV 147/L 126)

Throughout his career, this criticism of abstract terms will always be a central point of Leibniz's nominalist ontology. The same argument against the possibility of having a sort of infinite chain of further levels of abstractions will be repeated in many other passages.

See, for instance, the following passage, taken from a still unpublished text tentatively dated around 1704, where the same argument is used with reference to his criticism of the reality of relations:

If relations were real entities in things themselves rather than something merely conceptual, there would be accidents simultaneously located in two subjects: for a relation is equally in both the related things. Furthermore, we will go to the infinite, and there would be infinitely many abstractions, and not just *Entitas* but also *Entitatitas*. For if *Entitas* were a being in itself, it would also have its own *Entitas*, which would certainly be *Entitatitas*, and so on to infinity, and no last foundation could be given, but the mind can always consider the attributes of each thing as predicates, definitions, truths, which are something real but only in the mind of he who is thinking of them²⁰.

on individual things. See, for example, *Anti-White*, XXXIV, 2: 381: «Again, by positive names two kinds of things are denoted, namely *being (ens)* and *to be (esse)*: under *being* are included those things which exist, or have existed, or will exist. Under *to be* are included the modes by which beings are conceived, which are usually called accidents». Cf. Pécharman (1992: 33).

20 «Si relationes essent entia in rebus ipsis realia aliter quam per conceptionem forent accidentia simul in duobus subjectis; nam relatio pari jure in utroque est relatorum. Praeterea irent in infinitum, et forent etiam abstractiones infinitae, et non solum *Entitas*, sed et *Entitatitas*. Nam si *Entitas* rursus *Ens* foret haberet *Entitatem* quae utique foret *Entitatitas*, et ita in infinitum,

In the text of the *Preface to Nizolius*, Leibniz emphasizes the fact that concrete, individual things are the only real things, the only items that should properly be called *res*, since abstractions are not things but only “modes of things”. In his marginal remarks on Nizolius’ book (A VI 2: 457 fn38) Leibniz observes that *ens* and *res* amount to same thing and thus there are no beings which are not things (and vice versa), thus excluding fictional things (*res fictae*). He then adds that if one equates *esse* and *ens*, one also has to take *res* in a narrower sense than *ens*, since there are beings which are not things – for instance, individual accidents («we do not say that qualities are things, but only modes of things») –, thus concluding that an *ens* can be either a thing or a mode (individual accident)²¹.

The reduction of *ens* to the being of individual substances and of *esse* to the *in-esse* of accidents was the central point of Hobbes’ ontology of predication. For Hobbes re-interprets the distinction between *ens* and *esse* in terms of a distinction between *existens* and *in-esse*, where the accident is a mode according to which a thing can be conceived (see the passage above where Leibniz points out that modes are just *apparendi facultates*).

Both Hobbes and Leibniz think that the reification of abstract terms leads to the kind of infinite regress that Leibniz denounced in the passage quoted above. In the text from the *Preface to Nizolius*, however, he also says that the infinite regress would lead to a contradiction, because it would involve a sort of self-predication of forms, which would amount to a situation in which «something would be the form of itself, or a part of its own concept, which implies a contradiction», for something would be part of its own concept and a part would thus coincide with the totality of which it is part, a conclusion he regards as contradictory. It should not be forgotten that Leibniz considers the part-whole axiom (the principle that the whole is greater than any of its parts) as a fundamental analytical proposition²². The sense in which such a kind of

nec daretur ullum fundamentum, sed mens potest rursus attributa cujusque rei considerare praedicata definitiones veritates realia quidem omnia sed in mente cogitantis» (LH IV, 3, 5e, Bl. 23v). Cf. A VI 4: 886, and also *Ad Christophori Stegmanni Metaphysicam Unitariorum*, edited in Jolley (1975: 187).

21 Cf. also §1 of the *Dissertatio de Arte Combinatoria*, A VI 1: 170 or GP IV 35 (DAC 69). In the subsequent paragraph of the *Preface*, Leibniz makes it explicit that the affections of being are the same things as the modes of being, and that these modes can either be absolute (quality) or relative (quantity and relation). In §3 he adds that it is obvious that neither quality nor quantity or relation are beings, and that they pertain to the object of metaphysics only *in actu signato* (*Ibidem*). The traditional distinction between *actus signatus* and *actus exercitus* hints at the difference between a form as it is actually present in the particulars and a form conceived in abstraction from any subject in which it is realized, i.e., it is just a way of rephrasing the distinction between the concrete and the abstract. Other times, the same distinction was employed to point out what we call the distinction between the use and the mention of a term; cf. Nuchelmans (1988).

22 Cf. Leibniz’s proof in the *Demonstratio Propositionum Primarum*, ca. 1671–72, A VI 2: 482–483, which is basically modelled on the demonstration advanced by Hobbes in *De Corpore*, VIII,

self-predication would imply a contradiction can be understood if one acknowledges that the *definiendum* is the whole, while the concepts which constitute the *definiens* are the parts in this case. Therefore, the name to be defined would be repeated into the definition itself, and thus the whole would be part of itself. This sort of impredicative definitions are explicitly forbidden according to the seventh property of good definitions as listed by Hobbes in *De Corpore* (VI, 15).

Thus, the names of accidents (i.e., abstract terms) are only derivative of concrete names: a thing is not said to be “white” because of its “whiteness”, but, on the contrary, “whiteness” is derivative from the thing’s being white, or, as Hobbes usually puts it, from its “to be white” (*esse album*), since the infinitive form allows us to understand that abstract terms are logically posterior to the structure of predication rather than prior to it. Such a distinction between the substantive and the infinitive form of abstract terms will be echoed by the mature Leibniz’s distinction between “philosophical abstracts” and “logical abstracts”: the latter (τὸ *sapientem esse* instead of the abstract term *sapientia*) explicitly reveals the propositional origin of those expressions, even though they will be employed in the context of Leibniz’s logical calculi to operate the reduction of propositions to terms²³.

3.5. Leibniz’s *Demonstratio Propositionum Primarum*. A Theory of Nominal Definitions

In a paper on hypothetical truths, Hidé Ishiguro has pointed out that Leibniz’s interest in this kind of propositions has always been related to «his philosophical interest in the nature of things, and in essences». Concerning the question of what is the ultimate ground of conditional truths, Ishiguro rightly recalls the controversy between realists and nominalists, pointing out that the core of such a controversy concerns the question «whether *de dicto* necessity depends on *de re* necessity or vice versa», and this, she observes, «is to ask whether all notions of *de re* necessity derive *ex vi terminorum* or not»²⁴.

When coming to Leibniz, however, Ishiguro says that «there is no room for so simple an opposition», because Leibniz believed that «things have natures or constitutional properties that make them behave in the way they do», but also

25. On this topic, see the seminal paper by M. Fichant (in Fichant 1998: 329–371).

23 See *Generales Inquisitiones*, 1686, §§138–143, A VI 4: 777–779. The same distinction is also discussed in *De Abstracto et Concreto*, ca. 1688, A VI 4: 992ff, where Leibniz explicitly notes that philosophical (or real) abstracts are supposed to be prior to the concretes, whereas logical (i.e., propositional) abstracts are posterior to them. Cf. also *New Essays*, III, viii, §1, A VI 6: 333–334. The Hobbesian origin of Leibniz’s account of logical abstracts has already been pointed out by Di Bella (1998: 252–253). On Leibniz’s theory of abstract terms, see also Mugnai (1976); Rauzy (1993).

24 Ishiguro (1990: 91).

that «we know these constitutional properties by acknowledging certain hypothetical truths». For Leibniz

propositions are made up of ideas, which he calls “terms”. So necessity for Leibniz does derive *ex vi terminorum* (he considered himself a nominalist). However, just as truth may be ascribed to a proposition, but is nevertheless a truth concerning the objects the proposition is about, so the necessity that is ascribed to a hypothetical proposition may concern the things the hypothetical proposition is about. It is *de re*, or about the nature of things. (Ishiguro 1990: 97–98)

This conciliatory account is made possible by Leibniz’s commitment to the reality of ideas as the kind of special objects these propositions are about, and which are the proper truth-makers of hypothetical propositions. The truth of such propositions does not depend on the way the actual world is, or just from the meaning of the expressions they contain: in this sense, they are not analytical truths, since the meaning of the predicate is not just part of the meaning of the subject.

Ishiguro’s analysis of the nature of hypothetical truths is mostly based on Leibniz’s 1675 letter to Simon Foucher, a very important document of the Paris period, in which, for the very first time, Leibniz explicitly states that the possibility, impossibility or necessity of things «is not a chimaera which we create, since all that we do consists in recognizing them [...]. But this possibility and this necessity form or compose what are called the essences or natures and the truths which are usually called eternal». For instance, the nature of the circle, together with all its properties, «is something which exists and is eternal (*est quelque chose d’existant et d’éternel*)» (A II 1²: 388/L 152).

When saying that possibility and necessity are not chimerical, Leibniz is granting them an ontological status, some kind of being in between that of the pure being of reason and the being of actual existence (in this case, Leibniz’s reference to the nature of the circle as *quelque chose d’existant* is not to be understood in terms of actual existence, at least not in the sense in which physical objects are said to exist).

This account of eternal truths, which rests on a defence of the real nature of essences and ideas (at least as they are in the mind of God), however, does not seem to be adequate to capture the views that emerge from Leibniz’s pre-Paris writings. Concerning his earlier writings, it seems that Leibniz’s understanding of the necessity of eternal or necessary truths is much closer to that of an austere (or “full-blooded”) form of nominalism – whereby the necessity of propositions is granted by their analyticity – than to his later view according to which this necessity relies on the reality of ideas in the mind of God²⁵. To substantiate

25 In his analysis of *De Arte Combinatoria*, Di Bella highlighted the presence of two (apparently) contrasting theories of abstraction. The first is concerned with the fact that “the human mind

this claim, I will refer to a text apparently drafted around 1671–72, which the editors entitled *Demonstratio Propositionum Primarum* (“On the Demonstration of First Propositions”), in which, among many other things, one can find one of Leibniz’s earliest formulations of the principle of sufficient reason (hereafter: PSR). The essay, however, is mainly concerned with the idea that, in order to produce a demonstration of a proposition, one must rely on the analysis of terms and, in particular, on their definitions.

Leibniz begins by stating that «no proposition should be accepted without proof, and no word without explanation». He then states that a “definition” has to be taken as «the explanation of a word» (*vocis explicatio*), while a “demonstration” is the same as «the explanation of a proposition» (*propositionis explanatio*). Alternatively, he characterises a definition as an *idea significata*, which means an idea expressed through sensible signs (or characters), and, accordingly, a demonstration is a *ratiocinatio significata*: the first consists in a chain of ideas, the second in a chain of definitions²⁶.

In the passage from the *Elements of Natural Law* quoted at the beginning, conditional truths were said to be derived from «a clear and distinct *imaginatio*, which Plato called an idea, and which, when expressed in words, is the same as a definition». I think that this sense of *idea*, to be understood in a broadly psychological sense, is what Leibniz has in mind when, distinguishing between propositions of reason and propositions of fact, he states that the former are «those which derive from ideas alone, or, what is the same, those which originate from

is so prolific in abstraction, that given any number of things, it can find a Genus for them, that is, the concept shared by each of them and by nothing outside them” (§53, A VI 1: 192 or GP IV 61/DAC 147). This, as Di Bella notes, involves a sort of “conceptual relativity”, potentially crushing the whole hierarchical order of the Porphyrian tree (with the only exceptions of the simplest concepts and the *infimae species*). In the very same paragraph, however, Leibniz introduces a somewhat different point of views according to which: «even if the mind does not find it [the common genus], God will know it, and the angels will find it, so that the basis (*fundamentum*) of all the mind’s abstractions is pre-existent» (*Ibidem*). This second remark seems to put a constraint on the selection of intermediate species, in contrast with the apparent arbitrariness of the combinatorial construction suggested in the first passage; cf. Di Bella (2005a: 37–38). Note that the same approach will be proposed again 35 years later, in Leibniz’s 1701 letter to A. Gakenholz concerning the classification of plants, where he explicitly refers to his discussion in the DAC. This text was originally published as *G.W.L. Epistola responsoria de Methodo Botanica ad Dissertationem A.C.G. Medici eximii in Monatlicher Auszug*, April 1701, VIII, 68–80; see the critical edition in A III 8: 653–662, especially 654–655: «as I already showed as an adolescent, a long time ago, [...] combinations of things according to set numbers afford a correspondence with the genera of so many inferior species, so that it may be understood that there are as many genera of species as there are combinations of things. [...] This brings it about that the combinatorial method (which in fact includes multiple divisions) is more fecund than the common method of division (which is content with a single division)» (transl. by Smith 2011: 304).

26 *Demonstratio Propositionum Primarum*, ca. 1671–72, A VI 2: 479; translated by M. Dascal in the appendix to Dascal (1987: 147). Cf. also Picon (2011).

conjoining definitions, owing nothing to the senses». Among these, Leibniz includes the hypothetical, necessary and eternal truths (like the “abstract” propositions of geometry, arithmetic, and phoronomy), like the principles that “the whole is greater than the part” or that “nothing is without a sufficient reason” (both of which will be demonstrated in the last part of the essay), or “the areas of circles are proportional to the squares of their diameters”, and so on. All these propositions are said to rest on definitions alone.

At this point, however, Leibniz introduces the following objection against his own position:

But –you may ask – how is it possible that definitions alone generate something new in the mind? Aren’t in fact the “new” propositions merely the old ones expressed in another way? And what is the use of proving a theorem, if I already know all about it, except the words? [...] Suppose someone learns Arithmetic, including, e.g., the Pythagorean table. What does he learn? Does he learn something new, except the words? When I learn that two multiplied by two is four, do I learn more than a numeral name, whose use –afterwards– in speaking and calculating, is more economical? And yet, without such words, or *any other constant signs in their places*, Arithmetic would be completely useless for us. Therefore, it is true to say that he who learns only matters of reason, theorems and definitions, does not in fact learn anything new but how to use what is already known. (A VI 2: 480–481/ Dascal 1987:148–149, italics in the original)

This is a traditional objection against the analytic nature of logic – most notably of Aristotelian syllogistics. The objection points out that, if the conclusions are already contained in the premises, and a logical derivation is just making explicit what is already implicit in them, then, when one proves a conclusion, nothing new is actually known. This objection can be generalized to the class of all those propositions which, according to Leibniz, rest on definitions alone. If a definition is just an explanation of the terms, then a demonstration (i.e., a chain of definitions) produces nothing new, and, thus, would be completely useless. In his reply, Leibniz initially complains about the fact that those who raise such an objection «have not yet understood the mysteries of science, and of ideas, and of what Plato called “reminiscence”». Reference to Plato notwithstanding, Leibniz is far from rejecting the core of the objection; he points out, indeed, that «it is true to say that he who learns only matters of reason, theorems and definitions, does not in fact learn anything but how to use what is already known».

Against the objection, however, he claims that such a kind of knowledge is very far from being useless; quite the contrary, it is extremely useful just because:

[r]easoning and demonstration do not amplify our thoughts, but only order them. Theorems have no other use than to say many things compendiously. And this implies that they are good for usage, for when many things are expressed

compendiously, it is easy to run through them simultaneously in order to compare them in thought and to coordinate them in order to solve problems [...]. (A VI 2: 481/Dascal 1987: 149–150)

What Leibniz is emphasizing here is the utility of using characters and other sensible signs (and words are among them) because, without them, arithmetic and all the other sciences «would be completely useless for us»: nobody could calculate very large numbers «if he had to imagine distinctly, for each number, all the units comprised in it», since it would take too much time and it would be impossible for our memory to store all these data and retain them. In a similar way, «nobody could follow a lengthy reasoning with his mind if certain signs or names had not been devised». If we could not use sensible characters, i.e., what Leibniz calls “blind thought” (*cogitatio caeca*), it would be impossible for any human being to conduct any demonstration beyond a certain (elementary) level of complexity. This, Leibniz notes, «would be impossible if, suppressing the names and all the equivalent signs, we should use the definitions instead of the defined terms» (A VI 2: 481/Dascal 1987:149).

Leaving aside any discussion of the topic of *cogitatio caeca* and its relevance to Leibniz’s project of universal characteristics²⁷, I will focus on the fact that, while stressing the utility of theorems in order to abridge series of definitions (that, otherwise, would be too long to be computed by any human mind), the young Leibniz plainly accepts the idea that the demonstrations do not amplify our thoughts, since they are just explanations of terms, while (complex) terms, on the other hand, are just signs which stand for a series or chain of definitions²⁸. The analytical nature of definitions, then, is accepted insofar as they are just explanations of *how* we use determinate signs (or terms or words), whereas they can be said to be “productive” (i.e., to produce something new) only from

27 On this topic, see at least Dascal (1978); Favaretti Camposampiero (2006).

28 Cf. the following passage from an earlier draft of Leibniz’s *Accessio ad Arithmetica Infinitorum* (end of 1672): «What could we learn, you will ask, when we investigate the theorems of such sciences? I will answer: nothing, if not to think more quickly and more distinctly in a practical sense, i.e., by employing certain symbols to put order among those ideas which we have already known and received from senses; i.e., those symbols are names or characters» (A II 1²: 350–351). In the final version, Leibniz will write a completely new version of this paragraph, in which he deals with the Hobbesian question of the arbitrary nature of propositions (because names are arbitrarily chosen): «To this claim, however, I answer that propositions do depend on definitions, insofar as they are expressed by means of words or other symbols. But non-symbolic thoughts (*cogitationes a symbolis*), i.e., the very same connections between ideas, derive either from sense or from a distinct imagination [...]. Therefore, it seems to me that one should distinguish between two kinds of propositions: those whose truth depend on sense such as experiments or observations of nature, and, on the other hand, those the truth of which derives from a clear and distinct imagination, i.e., from ideas, or, if you prefer, from definitions. For a definition is nothing but the meaning (*significatio*) of an idea, and of this kind are theorems of arithmetic and geometry. Marks and symbols are arbitrary, be they words or other characters; ideas themselves, on the other hand, look like the same for everyone» (A II 1²: 353).

a psychological point of view²⁹. Notice that in his notes to Nizolius, written a couple of years before the text just examined, Leibniz had already repeatedly observed that, properly speaking, true definitions can be only explanation of names, or, if you prefer, nominal definitions (as it was for Hobbes); a definition, indeed, is «nothing else than an accurate explanation of a name» (A VI 2: 454)³⁰.

I believe that Leibniz's doctrine of real definitions (and real essences) originates from his confrontation with Descartes' theory of ideas and, in particular, the renewal of the ontological argument for the existence of God, which takes place at the end of his Paris period, as I will argue in the next chapter³¹.

3.6. A Weak Account of Possibility: Clear and Distinct Conceivability

Returning to the *Preface to Nizolius*, the best thing one can do to try to make sense of what Leibniz says here and in other texts of his earlier production, is to begin from the claim according to which «clarity is measured by the understanding, truth by sense». As a matter of fact, Leibniz in the *Preface* seems to be more interested in discussing “clarity” than “truth”, and, moreover, to emphasize the relevance of *clarity* not only for what concerns the choice of terms or words, but also the construction of speech (in the context of his criticism of the obscurities of the philosophical jargon of the Schoolmen).

Clarity, however, has a far broader sense, as it appears from its definition: «That is clear which is well perceived; so speech is clear if the meanings of all its words are known, at least to the attentive» (A VI 2: 408–409/L 121). When he says that clarity is measured by the understanding – just as truth is measured by the sense – , Leibniz seems to point out that clarity has to be taken as the criterion for possibility. This can be confirmed by a quick examination of some passages in which he tries to explain the notion of possibility.

As far as “possibility” is concerned, let me recall that in the long passage from the *Elementa Juris Naturalis*, from which the discussion derived its initial

29 Cf. §33 of the first part of the *Nova Methodus*: «Terms are either simple or composite. *Simple terms* are those which cannot be made clear by more familiar terms, because they are given immediately to sense, that is, they are themselves sensible qualities» (A VI 2: 285/L 89). Cf. also *Commentatiuncula de Jure Controversiarum* (ca. 1669–71), §66, where Leibniz recommends that a «book of definitions» be drafted, in which «all the used names are to be defined, until indefinable terms be reached» (A VI 1: 558). On the connection between existence and sensibility, see Chapter 5 below.

30 Cf. also A VI 2: 454, where Leibniz makes it clear that definition can only be an explanation of names: «*Imo vero definitio nihil aliud quam accurata nominis explicatio est*». As pointed out by Picon, the criticism of Hobbes's supernominalism (A VI 2: 428–429) does not belong to the original edition of Leibniz's *Preface to Nizolius*, and is also missing from the second printed edition of 1674. Cf. Picon (2014b); see also Dascal (1987: 61–79).

31 One could note, moreover, that this is also the way in which Leibniz himself reconstructs his own philosophical development on this point: see *De Synthesi et Analysisi Universalis*, ca. 1683–85, A VI 4: 541–542. Cf. Chapter 4 below.

impetus, Leibniz connected his conception of an “idea”, taken as a clear and distinct *imaginatio* (which, when expressed in words, gives rise to a definition), to the notion of possibility: «That which can be understood clearly [...] is not always true, though it is always possible; and it is also true, in addition, whenever the only question is that of possibility», whereas, on the other hand, when the question concerns necessity (of a proposition), one has to prove the impossibility of the opposite, «for if we call something necessary, we deny the possibility of its opposite» (A VI 1: 460/L 133)³². At the same time, however, the notion of possibility (and, derivatively, all the other modal notions) receives a characterization in terms of “clear and distinct conceivability” (again, a modal notion), which has to be emphasized, since it represents the core of Leibniz’s early account of modality³³.

One of Leibniz’s earliest (1670–71) attempts to tackle the problem of theodicy – the unfinished German essay *Von der Allmacht und Allwissenheit Gottes und der Freiheit des Menschen* (“On the Omnipotence and Omniscience of God and the Freedom of Man”) – contains rather an interesting digression on possibility. Here, Leibniz claims that an explanation of what words like “possibility” or “necessity” mean is required by the fact that we do use and understand them when we talk, and this cannot be reduced to a mere matter of fact, but calls for a rational (i.e., not based on perception or experience) demonstration: «if you want to prove that something that neither is nor was can be or cannot be, then you employ not feeling [as in the case of the proposition ‘the fire is warm’] but rather distinct rational ground» (§9, A VI 1: 539/CP 11).

To ask “what is possibility?”, however, seems to be as fanciful as to ask “what is truth?”. If you listen to what the Schoolmen said *de radice possibilitatis*, i.e., «about the roots and inner nature of possibility, you will hear such fantastic and confusing things that you will thank God when they stop» (A VI 1: 540/CP 13). According to Leibniz, one should not focus on some subtle and intricate philosophical account but, rather, on the linguistic practice of everyday people, i.e., on what they mean when saying that something is possible:

If one considers their actions or, more especially, what they say and think, it will be the case that now and then they offer a past or present example, and then the

32 On Leibniz’s version of the modal square, see A VI 1, 466, discussed by Poser (1969: 16–25). The most relevant aspect of these fragments on natural right consists in the attempt to show the connection between what we call alethic and deontic modalities.

33 In the *Confessio Philosophi* (1672–73), however, Leibniz presents both derivations, one that moves from the necessary and derives all the other modal notions in terms of necessity and negation, and the other that moves from the possible, understood as “what is clearly understood”, where he corrects himself and claims that the verb *posse* should be removed from the definition of what is possible; see A VI 3: 127. The logical and the epistemic characterizations of modal concepts seem to go hand in hand, however, with no prominence of the former over the latter.

matter is settled. For what happened can happen. But occasionally, owing to a lack of comparable examples, they need another tactic; they use examples for this which seem just a little or even less possible and yet were true and therefore also possible. In this way, they use impossibility in order to show possibility, just as people are sometimes content to say, “This remains possible until someone comes along who proves its impossibility”. How, then, does one show impossibility? Pay attention to the thoughts and speech of the people and you will find out. That is to say, they concern themselves with explaining a matter whose possibility is in doubt. If something is now clearly explainable, and imaginable in all its intricacy, then one holds it to be possible; if one comes upon something that is in itself confused and self-contradictory, then one holds it to be impossible [...]. Thus, something is possible that allows itself to be clearly explained without confusion and without contradiction. (§10, A VI 1: 540/CP 13, transl. mod.)

In the first part of this passage, Leibniz seems to refer to the notion of “presumption of possibility”, which he takes from legal theory and which will also be used, at a later date, in one of his attempts at proving the existence of God³⁴. In the second part of the quoted passage, he adds that impossibility is based on confusion and contradiction, and, thus, possibility must be understood as «something that allows itself to be clearly explained without confusion and without contradiction». These two characterizations are not regarded as mutually opposed (as representative, respectively, of an epistemic and a logico-ontological account of possibility), as it will happen when Leibniz will discuss Descartes’ ontological proof, but, rather, they are regarded as mutually supportive, as two sides of one and the same account of possibility.

Looking at other passages from the drafts devoted to the project of the *Elementa Juris Naturalis*, one can understand that this account of possibility has to be taken as a post-existential rather than as a pre-existential one: «We call

34 Cf. A VI 1: 471–472, where – in the context of juridical reasoning – Leibniz distinguishes between *facilis*, *probabilis*, and *praesumendum*, each of which is characterized by a different degree of intelligibility. What is probable is what is more possible (*possibilis*), i.e., what is more intelligible (*intelligibilis*) in an absolute sense; on the other hand, what is more feasible (*facilis*) is what is more intelligible in itself, or, which is the same, something which has less requisites than its opposite, i.e., when compared to other similar things. Furthermore, *facilis* and *praesumendum* are distinguished as part and whole: what is “feasible” is what has fewer requisites than its opposite (and, then, it is the alternative that can be realized more easily), whereas what has to be presumed is something whose requisites are parts of the requisites of its opposite. The latter formulation is quite obscure, but can be understood in terms of a sort of bias in favour of possibility over impossibility, since, according to Leibniz, for something to be impossible it is required something more than it is required for it to be possible, probably because Leibniz takes “impossibility” as an impediment to the realization of a possibility. Therefore, Leibniz derives the practical rule according to which one must believe that something is possible until someone proves its impossibility. The entire argument, however, is based on a bias in favour of possibility, which makes it highly questionable. On this point, see Adams (1988a); cf. also Boucher (2001).

possible [...] everything which is understood (*intelligitur*) in a clear and distinct way, and there is no other criterion of possibility [...] available to mankind other than existence itself» (A VI 1: 472)³⁵. Commenting on this passage, Marine Picon noted that existence should be taken as the criterion of possibility from the (epistemic) point of view of our finite minds, which «can only know [possibility] by extrapolation from what actually exists» (Picon 2014a: 58). I agree, but this does not mean, in my opinion, that Leibniz, at this stage, already had in mind his notion of possibility as “intrinsic intelligibility”, the latter explicitly conceived in opposition to an epistemic criterion of possibility. For these two notions can be conceived as mutually distinct only if one assumes that possibility as “intrinsic intelligibility” in a logical sense (non-contradiction) is sufficient to ground a positive account of possibility as an essence, something whose reality, for Leibniz, will coincide with its degree of perfection (or its tendency to exist). Such an ontological foundation of the notion of possibility (which coincides with its theological foundation, since *possibilia* are nothing but the objects of divine understanding), will be required in order to distinguish genuine possibility from pure fictions (or imaginary entities).

When such an ontological foundation is lacking, however, as in the case of the young Leibniz (who shared Thomasius’ deflationary attitude toward potential being; cf. Chapter 2 above), there is no way of providing such a distinction between the possible as designating a “real” essence and the possible as designating something fictional or imaginary. Then, the logical and the epistemic account of possibility can go hand in hand, so that the status of the barely possible is equated to that of a fictional entity, like that of Barclay’s *Argenis*, which «is possible, i.e., is clearly and distinctly imaginable, even if it is quite certain that she never lived, nor I do believe that she will ever live» (*Confessio Philosophi*, 1672–73, A VI 3: 128/CP 57–59).

Such a conception of the possible as a fiction will be retained by the mature Leibniz. It will be included, however, in a wider picture, one which also makes a space for an ontology of possibles (even if only appreciable from a God’s eye perspective, so to speak). The view that the possible is what can be clearly and distinctly imagined or conceived will also be retained, especially when Leibniz wants to point out the difference between the possible and the existent, where the latter is understood as what can be clearly and distinctly perceived³⁶.

35 In the same passage, *intelligi* is said to be «*quod in re locum habet, quod in rem cadit, quod possibile est, quod ex hypothesi verum est* (what has a place in reality, what pertains to the thing, what is possible, what is hypothetically true)».

36 For instance, in a series of definitions written between 1690 and 1694, the distinction between “essence” and “existence” is stated in terms of that between “distinct thinkability” (*cogitabilitas distincta*) and “distinct sensibility” (*sensibilitas distincta*), or, as Leibniz remarks, between *conceptibilitas* and *perceptibilitas* (LH IV, 8, Bl. 102). Anyway, such a characterization can be found almost everywhere in the table of definitions drafted by Leibniz in the 1680s, and

One could say that a theological (if not properly ontological) foundation of the possible can be found in Leibniz's 1671 letter to Magnus Wedderkopf, where Leibniz writes: «God wills those things that he perceives to be the best and, likewise, the most harmonious; and he selects them, so to speak, from the infinite number of all the possibles (*ex numero omnium possibilium infinito*)» (A II 1²: 186/CP 3). A few lines later, Leibniz adds the following remark: «For essences of things are just like numbers, and they contain the very possibility of entities, which God does not bring about, as he does existence, *since these very same possibilities – or ideas of things – coincide rather with God himself*» (*Ibidem*, italics mine). Possibles, then, are equated with the essences or ideas of things. About these, Leibniz says: (a) they are not created by God (since the essences of things do not depend on God's will), (b) the independence of possibilities from God's will is explained by the fact that they coincide with God himself. Point (b) is consistent with the (Ockhamist) account of divine ideas which I have ascribed to Leibniz above. Leibniz also says that, properly speaking, there is no distinction between God and ideas as the objects of his understanding. That is why, from (b), necessitarian consequences follow, as Leibniz himself frankly acknowledges in the final part of the letter.

Regarding point (a), it has already been noted that possibility, here, is not to be taken in opposition to necessity, but only as referring to the nature of things, or «the Idea that renders the thing possible, non-contradictory in itself and clearly conceivable, able to be brought into existence (in conformity with its Idea)» (Rateau 2019: 45); reference to an infinite number of possibles is not intended to promote the idea of an infinity of possible worlds³⁷. This point will be discussed at length in the chapters that follow (see especially Chapter 6 below).

3.7 Leibniz's Criticism of Nizolius: An Anticipation of the *pays des possibles*?

Against what I have said so far, it may be observed that something like an ontology of the possible(s) is already at work in Leibniz's remarks on Nizolius, especially in his criticism of Nizolius' account of universals. From Nizolius' claim that genera and species can be reduced to collections of singulars, it seems to follow that, if all the actual individuals were removed from the world or annihilated, then genres and species would disappear as well³⁸. In this case, however, a proposition like “All human beings are animals” would no longer be true. Against this consequence, Leibniz argues as follows:

it will be repeated in his later writings too (see for instance LH IV, 7C, Bl. 89–96, dated ca. 1703).

37 For a different reading of this text, see Schepers (2017).

38 Cf. M. Nizolio, *De Veris Principiis et Vera Ratione Philosophandi contra Pseudophilosophos* (1553), I, 4, in: Nizolio (1956: 43–44). For a detailed analysis of Nizolius' position on this point, see Nauta (2018); Picon (2021: 215–220). See also Angelelli (1965).

He [Nizolius] is wrong about this point, since, even if all the singulars were removed from the world, nonetheless the truth of the universal proposition will be preserved at the level of possibles (*in possibilibus*). Indeed, even if all the elephants in the world were killed, this proposition will still remain true: “Every elephant is an animal”. It can actually be resolved, indeed, into this other conditional one: “If something is an elephant (no matter if it exists now or not), it is an animal. (A VI 2: 448 fn6)³⁹

The claim that the truth of universal propositions rests not on the actually existing individuals but, rather, *in possibilibus*, could be read as an anticipation of what will be Leibniz’s future commitment to the “realm of possibles”, i.e., to his mature doctrine of possible worlds. But I believe, to the contrary, that, when it comes to his understanding of modality and, especially, his doctrine of possibility, there are substantial differences between the young and the mature Leibniz.

Against Nizolius’ claim, that knowledge of universals cannot be true since universals are not real entities, Leibniz objects that:

This does not follow. Since knowledge is not only about existing things, but also about possible ones, and it is not concerned with the fact whether a triangle actually exists or not, but only with what follows if it does exist, for instance how its angles are. Knowledge, therefore, does not concern real universals, but only all singular things, also the possible ones (A VI 2: 461 fn49).

Notice that Leibniz, in this passage, emphasizes the fact that demonstrative knowledge (or science) does not concern the factual question of what exists, but only what follows (*consequens*) from the existence of something (e.g., a triangle), which is nothing but the same point stressed by Hobbes with his distinction between “essences” and “consequences of the essences”, which has been discussed above⁴⁰. However, I think that the key to understand Leibniz’s point here can be found in the last line of the quotation: «*Scientia igitur non est de universalibus realibus, sed de omnis singularibus etiam possibilibus*» (emphasis mine). The distinction at stake, indeed, is not so much the one between the actual and the

39 Cf. also Leibniz’s remark on a passage from book IV of Nizolius’ work: «To tell the truth, even if human beings were not regenerated, but the whole of mankind were extinguished, nonetheless many true things could still be said about mankind, since the following proposition would still be true: “If a human being is given (even if at the present moment there is none), it is necessary that he is an animal”» (A VI 2: 451 fn18).

40 Cf. also Hobbes’ reply to Descartes’ account of true natures in the *Fifth Meditation*, where he distinguishes between the “name” and the “nature” of a thing, for instance of a triangle, and proceeds by showing that the name persists even if the thing perishes (together with its nature), and, since universal propositions are about names and not about natures or essences of things, universal propositions can be true even if the things cease to exist (AT VII: 193/CSM II: 135–136).

possible but is more the one between universals *in rebus* (which Leibniz rejects) and singular things, i.e., individuals, possible as well as actual⁴¹.

When discussing Thomasius' view on eternal truths, I have already pointed to the fact that, in the tradition of the late-Scholastic semantics, the most popular interpretation of a proposition like "A human being is an animal" was one in which the subject-term "human being" stands for its "total denotation" – namely, for all men that are, were or will be. This was the most popular interpretation, at least among the nominalist thinkers, also because the opposite account, that of the realists, was regarded as a very implausible one, insofar as it pretended to claim that a proposition like "A human being is an animal" is about individuals and, at the same time, and also that its truth is independent of the existence of either man or animals.⁴² Reference to individuals was required by the fact that the terms occurring in these propositions were said to have "personal supposition", i.e., what we would call "referential use", and not "simple supposition", as in the case of "human being" in a proposition like "Human being is a species", which is a typically non-referential context⁴³. Since the idea of referring to something like an individual concept had not been considered by this tradition, the nominalist solution was by far the most plausible one.

41 As it has been noted, the paradox is that «in one of the most anti-realistic of Leibniz's writings, universal truths are framed not so much in the frankly intensionalist language of conceptual inclusion, but in the quasi-extensionalist one of possible individuals» (Di Bella 2005a: 135). Di Bella sees Leibniz's view in this passage as in accordance with Ockham's theory of ideas, explaining that in God's understanding we do not find the universal idea (like "humanity") but only the ideas of possible individuals, and that divine ideas are just these possible individuals.

42 See Ashworth (1974: 89) and my discussion of Thomasius in Chapter 2 above. About the Preface to Nizolius, see also Leibniz's claim that "an utterance is *true* whose meaning is perceived through a right disposition of both the percipient and the medium", and its application to the case of mathematical truths: A VI 2: 409/L 121. Of course this account of truth (and of mathematical truths) is very remote from Leibniz's mature views.

43 This point emerges clearly from a passage from the *Summulae* (1529) of Domingo de Soto, in which the Dominican theologian says that in propositions like "Man is a rational animal" or "Every triangle has three angles" «the subject stands for all their significates even if none of them exist and that is what we call to supposit naturally [...]. For we do not claim that these propositions are true because their terms would supposit simply for eternal essences of things, but because they supposit personally, for the individuals, even if they do not exist» (*Summule fratris Dominici Soto*, Burgos 1529, fo. 19v, quoted and translated by Picon 2014b: 3). Personal supposition was usually divided into natural and accidental supposition, where the latter was restricted only to the time determined by the verb (usually: the present time), whereas the latter stands for the total denotation of the term (reference was extended to both past, present and future existence).

Chapter 4. The Young Leibniz and the Ontological Argument. From Rejection to Reconsideration

4.1. Leibniz and the Cartesian Proof. An Overview

Leibniz's attitude toward the ontological, or – as it was known before Kant – the Cartesian argument for the existence of God, is well known among scholars. In many of his writings, he defends the view that the Cartesian argument is not an inconsistent but just an incomplete proof; summarizing his point in the *New Essays*, he remarks that «the demonstration which M. Descartes borrowed from Anselm [...], is truly most elegant and ingenious but that there is still a gap to be filled» (NE, A VI 6: 437). The gap is located in the notion of “the most perfect being”, from which the Cartesian proof starts.

If one acknowledges that (a) we have the idea of such a being («a being whose greatness or perfection is supreme, containing within himself every degree of it»), and that (b) existence itself is a perfection or a degree of perfection, then he must conclude that the most perfect being must contain existence in itself, otherwise it would not be the most perfect being: «this degree of greatness and perfection (or rather this perfection) which consists in existence is in that wholly great and wholly perfect supreme being; for otherwise he would be lacking in some degree [...]» (NE, A VI 6: 437).

The conclusion, however, can be resisted if one rejects either premise (a) or premise (b). Traditional criticisms of the ontological argument focused on (b), rejecting the idea that existence might be considered as a perfection or as a “real predicate” (as Kant would say). This question was touched upon in passing by Leibniz himself, especially in his correspondence with the Cartesian Arnold Eckhard in the first half of 1677; but also in that case, Leibniz seemed more interested in pointing out that existence must be regarded as a “degree of perfection” (with “perfection” interpreted as a sort of *singulare tantum*) and not as a perfection (one among many others), rather than in questioning the supposed connection between existence and perfection¹.

1 Cf. Leibniz's letter to Arnold Eckhard, Summer 1677: «Several of my objections have ended since you have explained that in your usage, perfection is a being (*Entitas*) [...], or, as I should prefer to define it, that perfection is the degree or quantity of reality or essence [...]. It is clear, also, that existence is a perfection or increases reality» (A II 1²: 543/L 177); see also a short text, probably written in this same period, A VI 4: 1354, where Leibniz concludes that existence is not a “degree of reality”, but, rather, as a sort of comparison among perfections, or «the exceedance (*excessus*) of the degree of reality of a thing upon the degree of reality of the opposite thing». This characterization of existence is also applied to the particular case

On the contrary, Leibniz insisted very much on premise (a), not in order to dismantle the soundness of the Cartesian argument, but, rather, on the basis of a different, more restrictive criterion of admissibility for the claim that we have an idea of the most perfect being. As Leibniz says in the *New Essays*, the argument

is not fallacious, but it is an incomplete demonstration which assumes something which should also be proved in order to render the argument mathematically evident. The point is that it is tacitly assumed that this idea of a wholly great or wholly perfect being is possible and does not imply a contradiction. Even that remark enables us to prove something, namely that if God is possible he exists – a privilege which only the Divinity possesses. (NE, A VI 6: 437–438)

Without a “proof of possibility,” i.e., a proof that the concept of “the most perfect being” is logically consistent and, therefore, involves a real possibility and is not just a fiction of our mind, the Cartesian argument amounts just to a demonstration of the hypothetical claim: “if God (= the most perfect being) is possible (= his notion does not involve a contradiction), then he exists (because the privilege of the notion of God is that his bare possibility involves existence)”².

It is important to remark that this conclusion was reached by Leibniz quite early in his philosophical career. It is already at work in the philosophical notes drafted during his Paris period, also known by the collective title *De Summa Rerum*. For a clear statement in this sense, we can refer to a text dated 15 April 1676:

In the chapter of St. Thomas’ *Summa contra Gentiles* which is entitled, “Whether the existence of God is known per se”, there is a reference to an elegant argument which some use to prove the existence of God. The argument is: God is that than which nothing greater can be thought. But that than which nothing greater can be thought cannot not exist. [...] This argument comes to the same as one which has often been advanced by others [i.e., Descartes]: namely, that a most perfect being exists. St. Thomas offers a refutation of this argument, but I think that it is not to be refuted, but that it needs supplementation. For it assumes that a being which cannot not exist, and also a greatest or most perfect being, is possible (A VI 3: 510–511/DSR 63).³

On this point, there is remarkable continuity between what Leibniz states in this text and what he will say thirty years later in the *New Essays*, where, once again, he refers to the origin of the proof in the works of Anselm of

of God, cf. A VI 4: 626 (ca. 1685). On the connection between perfection and existence, see Heinekamp (1969: 135ff); Adams (1994: 113–123). See also Chapters 8 and 9 below.

2 For an early statement of Leibniz’s criticism of Descartes’ “way of ideas”, cf. the scholium to *Quod Ens Perfectissimum Existit* (1676), A VI 3: 580/DSR 103.

3 The question had already been touched upon a few months earlier, in December 1675, see A VI 3: 462 (DSR 3–5), but in a less clear way. In the text quoted above, Leibniz refers to Aquinas, *Summa contra Gentiles* I, 10–11. Concerning Aquinas’ position, see further below.

Canterbury, and criticizes Aquinas and other Schoolmen for having regarded the argument as a fallacious one, before insisting upon the need for a proof of possibility (cf. again A VI 6: 437–438). In the period between these two texts, Leibniz’s work on the ontological argument was mainly focused on the development of a possibility proof and the attempt at reformulating the proof in a more compact way, moving from the notion of “the most perfect being” (*ens perfectissimum*) to that of “necessary being” (*ens necessarium*)⁴.

That said, however, there is at least one example of remarkable discontinuity in Leibniz’s reflections on the ontological argument, which, to the best of my knowledge, has not been given due attention in the discussions on the topic. I have in mind the position held by Leibniz in the period of his very early writings, especially the Mainz period 1670–72, to the position at the end of his Paris period, as announced in the text dated April 1676 quoted above. What I want to show here is that in texts written prior to his Paris notes of 1675–76, the young Leibniz in fact rejected the ontological proof on the basis of arguments related to the criticism of premise (b) discussed above.

In what follows, I will consider in particular one important text in which the young Leibniz rejects the Cartesian proof as an unsound and flawed argument, rather than as an incomplete proof, emphasizing the opposition between this earlier account and the one he will defend in his later writings. Additionally, I shall attempt to position Leibniz’s rejection of the ontological argument within the more general framework of his early philosophy, showing that the transition from the rejection of the Cartesian proof in the period 1670–72 to its re-evaluation in the Paris notes (1675–76) is a sign of a more general evolution of Leibniz’s philosophical views. Finally, I will briefly appraise the reconsideration of the ontological argument in a paper written at the beginning of 1678, showing how Leibniz implicitly reacts to the kind of criticism of the argument which he himself shared in the Mainz period.

4.2 The Demonstration of the Existence of God in the Young Leibniz

To the best of my knowledge, it is impossible to find a defence of the ontological argument (of the kind discussed above) in Leibniz’s texts before the notes written in Paris during the year 1675–76. Of course, both in the *Dissertatio de Arte Combinatoria* (1666) and in the *Confessio Naturae contra Atheistas* (1668), the young Leibniz had already proposed his own proofs of the existence of God. These two attempts, however, cannot be regarded as examples of *a priori* proofs in the traditional sense, i.e., proofs moving from the cause to the effects. Neither of these attempts, moreover, starts from the concept of God as the

4 For an overview of Leibniz’s different formulations of the ontological argument, see Blumenfeld (1994); Antognazza (2018b); Look (2018).

most perfect being or the necessary being as in the two main versions of the ontological argument.

The *Dissertatio* includes a demonstration of the existence of God, which precedes the treatise itself. This demonstration is explicitly based on the reality of motion and on the traditional axiom: *omne quod movetur ab alio movetur*. It presupposes the empirical observation that some particular body is actually in motion (A VI 1: 169–170/DAC 67–68). In the *Confessio*, the existence of God is derived by means of an argument intended to show that both figure and motion in physical bodies must ultimately be grounded in the existence of an incorporeal being (see A VI 1: 489–492/L 109–112). I shall not discuss the details of these arguments here, though they represent an interesting attempt at reformulating traditional arguments within the mechanical philosophy’s new ontology of motion⁵. While no attempt at defending the ontological proof is presented in these works, this is not sufficient reason, however, to conclude that he rejected the argument in itself. In order to do so, I must take into account other texts of this period, where the young Leibniz explicitly considers the strength of the proof.

The first text to be taken into account is the *Demonstrationum Catholicarum Conspectus*, apparently written around 1668–69, which represents the draft of a great philosophical and theological work, the idea of which had been entertained by Leibniz for a long time⁶. The conspectus clarifies that the prolegomena to this project must help constitute a series of “Elements of Philosophy”, among which Leibniz includes his own *Elementa de mente et de corpore* (A VI 1: 494). The first part of this conspectus is entirely focused on the demonstration of the existence of God. There, Leibniz lists five different proofs of the existence of God, each one based on a different principle: (1) “nothing is without reason” (i.e., the PSR); (2) motion is impossible without a continuous creation; (3) there is no origin of motion in bodies; (4) there is no origin of cohesion in bodies; (5) moral certainty, i.e., the beauty of the world must arise from a mind. Notice that proof (5) resembles the obscure remarks in the letter to Johan Friedrich discussed above, just as (2) and (3) seem to have much in common with the proofs discussed respectively in the *De Arte Combinatoria* and the *Confessio Naturae*.

In addition to these five points, Leibniz deems it necessary to add a sixth entry on: «The paralogisms committed by some in the demonstrating of God’s existence, especially Descartes, Ward (Hogelande is to be considered here), and

5 Rateau (2019: 34) observes that «the[se] demonstrations are based primarily on arguments drawn from physics», showing also their apologetic function within the context of the *Demonstrationes Catholicae*.

6 For a description of Leibniz’s great plan connected to the project of the *Demonstrationes Catholicae*, see Antognazza (2008: 3–15).

Valeriano Magni» (A VI 1: 494/LGR 23)⁷. This remark, however, is too short to understand in which sense, at this stage, Leibniz regarded the Cartesian proof as a paralogism. It is quite striking, in any case, that already in this quick remark, he does not say (as he will do from the Paris period onward) that the Cartesian argument is an incomplete proof, i.e., not one that must be outright rejected, but a flawed proof in need of completion.

In order to understand the reason why the young Leibniz labels Descartes' proof as a paralogism, we must take into consideration a slightly later text: a piece Leibniz himself entitled *Specimen Demonstrationum de Natura Rerum Corporearum ex Phaenomenis* ("An Essay of Demonstrations concerning the Nature of Bodies, drawn from Phenomena"), probably written in the second half of 1671. A partial version of this text had already been published by Willy Kabitz in his seminal book on the philosophy of the young Leibniz⁸. The complete critical edition, however, was given only in A VI 2 (303–308), and an English translation of the text is also available (L 142–144). These efforts notwithstanding, this text has always been somewhat neglected by scholars⁹. As the critical edition clearly shows, this text is one among a series of papers and drafts, dating from 1669 to 1672, related to the project of the composition of the *Elementa de mente et de corpore*. At the same time, these reflections should be regarded as a sort of metaphysical counterpart of Leibniz's early physics, described in his two treatises, *Theoria Motus Abstracti* and *Hypothesis Physica Nova*, both written between 1670 and 1671¹⁰.

As the title itself clarifies, the *Specimen Demonstrationum* is not directly concerned with rational theology nor with the proof of God's existence. In a seemingly bizarre way, Leibniz comes to discuss the ontological proof only to contrast it with a proof he himself presents in this text: a proof devoted to show that space and body are really distinguishable and that an empty space, therefore, is something possible. This might seem particularly strange to us, because we know that the mature Leibniz will harshly reject the possibility of a real distinction between space (or extension) and physical bodies¹¹. One must acknowledge, however, that the young Leibniz entertained a somewhat different

7 In addition to Descartes' texts, the other works mentioned here are: Samuel Ward, *Tentamen de Dei Existentia* (Oxford 1642); Cornelius van Hogelande, *Cogitationes, quibus Dei existentia item animae spiritualitas et possibilis cum corpore unio demonstrantur* (Amsterdam 1646); Valeriano Magni, *Opus Philosophicum* (Litomyšl 1660). Valeriano Magni is mentioned as a supporter of the ontological proof in Leibniz's letter to Oldenburg, 28 December 1675, A II 1²: 393/L 165.

8 See Kabitz (1909: 44–48) and text edited at 141–144

9 In his extensive discussion of the ontological argument, Adams (1994: 135, fn1) refers to this text only in passing, merely noting that: «In 1671 Leibniz did not yet give this objection [i.e., that the Cartesian proof is incomplete], but a quite different one, to the Cartesian argument».

10 Leibniz drafted two different versions of the *Specimen Demonstrationum*, the first printed at A VI 2: 300–303, and the second at 303–308. I will focus just on the second version, and only on the part concerning the ontological proof. On Leibniz's early physics, see Beeley (2018).

11 At some point Leibniz will write a short note called *Demonstratio quod spatium non sit res a corpore distincta* (LH XXXVII, 3, Bl. 119). It is impossible to establish when Leibniz wrote this text,

view on this point: in his very early writings, indeed, space is understood as a quasi-substantial entity, that is, something «almost more substantial even than body; for if body is eliminated, space and its dimension remain, and when no other body comes into it this is called a vacuum, but on the contrary, body does not remain when space is eliminated»¹². The same argument will be discussed at length in the *Specimen Demonstrationum*, written a few years later.

In this text, Leibniz is establishing that space has to be taken as a sort of condition of possibility of our sense perceptions, because, while what is sensed by us now can no longer be sensed later on (because the objects of our perceptions change), space itself has always to be presupposed by the very same possibility of any sense perception whatsoever (see A VI 2: 305/L 143). First, Leibniz states that space and body are distinctly conceivable. From distinct conceivability, however, he seems to draw the conclusion that space and body are also really distinct:

However, space and body are distinct. For we perceive that we think of space as identical when bodies change, and what we perceive ourselves to be thinking or not thinking we perceive truly. The perception of thought is immediate to the thought itself in the same subject, and so there is no cause of error. Therefore, it is true that we think of space as remaining identical when bodies change and that we can think of space without a body which is in it. Now two things are distinct if one can be thought of without the other. Therefore, space and a body are distinct. (A VI 2: 305/L 143)

Leibniz's argument seems to move from a conceptual distinction to a real one, i.e., from a distinction holding in the realm of thought to one holding in reality. This would make the argument itself very weak, but we should remember that what Leibniz calls "space" here is very similar to the notion of "imaginary space" discussed by Hobbes in *De Corpore* (1655). Hobbes himself, in chapter VIII of *De Corpore*, proceeded to the derivation of the notion of body (defined as something *existens* and *subsistens per se*) from the notion of "imaginary space"¹³. Hobbes' inference (and Leibniz's new version thereof) seems to follow a path similar to that of the ontological proof, moving from the purely conceptual necessity of conceiving the body as something independent of the mind (or, in Leibniz's version, the space) to its real independence (or real distinction).

but its content makes me think it can be close to the period of the correspondence with Clarke; cf. Leibniz's fifth letter to Clarke, §67, GP VII 407.

12 Leibniz to Jakob Thomasius, 6 October 1668, A II 1²: 19. I am grateful to Richard Arthur for sharing with me the reference to this letter, alongside his translation of this passage. In his discussion of this text, he emphasizes the influence of Gassendi's conception of space on the young Leibniz. Cf. Arthur (2021: 143–158). On the development of Leibniz's views on space, see also De Risi (2025). For a commentary on Leibniz's letter to Thomasius, see Bodéüs (1993: 65–70).

13 On Hobbes's interpretation of "imaginary space," see Schuhmann (1992: 62–70).

Leibniz himself was aware of this apparent similarity between the two arguments, and anticipated the objection, claiming that his argument is not similar to the ontological proof, because the former is a consistent argument, whereas the latter is just a paralogism. A detailed discussion of Leibniz's own argument about space and his claim that it does not fall short of proving the real distinction of body and space is beyond the scope of this present work¹⁴. In what follows, I will focus instead only on Leibniz's remarks on the ontological argument, even though we should not forget the reason why these occur at this point of the text.

4.3 The *Specimen Demonstrationum* (ca. 1671). A Rejection of the Cartesian Proof

Immediately after having concluded in the *Specimen* that space and body are really distinct notions, Leibniz feels obliged to make it explicit that his own argument is not the same as Descartes's ontological proof.

His comments are as follows:

Let no one think that this demonstration is like Descartes' effort to demonstrate the existence of God from the idea in his mind. It will be worthwhile to show the difference briefly. Descartes' argument reduces to this. I think (clearly and distinctly) of a perfect being. Whatever I think (clearly and distinctly) is possible. Therefore, a perfect being is possible. Again, if something is possible, that without which it cannot be thought (that is, that without which it is not possible) is necessary. But a perfect being cannot be thought of without its existence. Therefore, the existence of a perfect being is necessary. The perfect being is God. Therefore, the existence of God is necessary. He could have condensed it in the following way: An existing being is possible. That without which it is not possible is necessary. An existing being without existence is not possible. Therefore, the existence of an existing being is necessary. Who would deny it? But, also, who would conclude from this that God exists, since, namely, we have already assumed that he exists? (A VI 2: 306/L 143–144).

First of all, one can see that, contrary to what will happen in the Paris notes, Leibniz does not suggest that Descartes' argument has to be completed but, rather, that it must be rejected insofar as it already presupposes the very same kind of existence it was supposed to prove. Since Leibniz himself confessed he had carefully studied Descartes' works only around 1675, when he was already in Paris, it is likely that his knowledge of Descartes' texts at this time was not a

14 Cf. A VI 2: 306/L 144. Kabitz (1909: 47), concludes that Leibniz's argument falls short, because it proves just the possibility of empty space and not its reality. Strictly speaking, I think he is right, but he seems to be wrong about Leibniz's true intentions. Leibniz's defence of his argument can be explained, at least partially, by reference to what he says in the first draft of the *Accessio ad Arithmeticae Infinitorum*, A II 1²: 350–351.

direct one: notice how, in the passage just quoted, Leibniz refers to the object of the proof as the *ens perfectum* rather than the *ens perfectissimum*¹⁵.

Already at this stage, however, Leibniz shows remarkable interest in simplifying the formulation of the argument in order to enlighten its formal and logical structure. He provides two different formulations of the argument. The second one, shorter and more condensed, can be written in the following way:

- a) An existing being is possible;
 - b) That without which something is not possible, is necessary;
 - c) An existing being without existence is not possible;
- Therefore,
- d) The existence of an existing being is necessary.

Premise (a) finds its justification in what Leibniz says in a sort of *lemma* mentioned only in the first formulation, where he reports the Cartesian claim that «whatever can be thought clearly and distinctly, is possible», and then applies it to the notion of “perfect being”. In this shorter version, however, the focus is shifted from the notion of “perfect being” to that of an “existing being” (a significant detail, as I will show in a moment). Premise (b) relies on the principle: «if something is possible, that without which it is not possible, is necessary». In (c), then, Leibniz applies premise (b) to the case of the possibility of an existing thing. The conclusion, however, is trivially true, since we have just derived existence from the notion of an existing being. Such a trivialization of the ontological proof is due to the substitution of “perfect being” with “existing being” in Leibniz’s report.

Leibniz himself motivates his choice in the following passage:

But Descartes’ entire reason obviously reduces to this. For he asserts that God is perfect only because he thinks that this proposition [‘God is perfect’] contains the proposition that God exists. But he has not yet proved that God is perfect in the sense that he already exists; this in turn rests on the question of whether he exists (*an sit*). (A VI 2: 306/L 144)

Leibniz’s criticism is grounded in the claim that Descartes wanted to prove the existence of God from an idea in the human mind (*«cum ex Idea mentis suae Existentiam Dei demonstrare conatus est»*). In this sense, the whole argument would

15 I assume that what Leibniz primarily has in mind here is the ontological proof Descartes gives in the *Fifth Meditation* (AT VII: 66). It does not make much difference as far as my point is concerned, however, if one takes into account the version of the proof given in §14 of the first part of the *Principia Philosophiae* (mentioned by Leibniz in GP IV 358–359, composed after 1690). Cf. Leibniz’s letter to Foucher, 1675: «I admit that I have not yet been able to read all his [Descartes’] writings with all the care I had intended to bring to them, and my friends know that, as it happened, I read almost all the new philosophers before reading him» (A II 1²: 388/ AG 2).

be just an illegitimate transition from what exists in the mind to what exists *in rerum natura*. Since there is no way to move from the former to the latter, the only result such an argument can achieve is to state a tautological claim: assuming that God already exists, we can conclude that it is necessary that he exists. In this case, however, the necessity at stake is not the absolute necessity of his existence (the claim that God is a necessary being), but only a conditional necessity, according to the traditional dictum: *omne quod est quando est necesse est esse*. As Leibniz notes: «he [Descartes] has not yet proven that God is perfect in the sense that he already exists», i.e., he has not yet answered the question concerning the *an sit* (i.e., actual existence).

Two remarks are in order here. The first concerns Leibniz's acceptance of what has been called the "logical objection" to the ontological argument¹⁶. The second has to do with his insistence on the trifling and tautological nature of Descartes' alleged proof.

In its main lines, the "logical objection" was stated for the first time by Aquinas against Anselm's version of the ontological proof. In a passage from the *Summa contra Gentiles* (also mentioned by Leibniz in the Paris paper quoted above), Aquinas rejects Anselm's definition of God as "a being than which nothing greater can be conceived". He notes that, even if everybody were to attach such a meaning to the name "God", it does not necessarily follow that such a being actually exists: «from the fact that that which is indicated by the name God is conceived by the mind, it does not follow that God exists save only in the intellect» (Aquinas 1975: 82). Aquinas' criticism is grounded in the belief that human beings cannot have access to the essence of God; thus, when talking of him (as in the case of a proposition like "God exists"), we are just picking out a name of God, not his essence. Descartes interpreted this objection as if Aquinas introduced a distinction between nominal and real definitions, and argued that, if we can actually provide a real definition of God, then the transition from the concept of God to his existence *in rerum natura* would be a fully legitimate one.

As has been pointed out, Descartes' proof in the *Fifth Meditation* is based on a metaphysics of "real essences" (or, in his own terms, "true and immutable natures"), inherited from the late Scholastic tradition: a domain of non-actualized entities having a kind of being of their own, intermediate between the being of actual existence and the nothingness of bare fictions¹⁷. Relying on this

16 For this terminology, cf. the classical work by Henrich (1967).

17 Cf. AT VII: 64: «I find within me countless ideas of things which even though they may not exist anywhere outside me still cannot be defined nothing; for although in a sense they can be thought of at will, they are not my invention, but have their own true and immutable natures» (CSM II: 44). As suggested by the example of the essence of the triangle, mentioned in the continuation of the passage, Descartes has in mind a sort of Platonic ontology of ideal entities. This ontology, however, should be reconciled with the conceptualist account

conception of essences, Descartes could reject the logical objection stating that essences pertain to the domain of being, not to that of thought; therefore, the deduction of existence from the essence of God is not an illegitimate one¹⁸. If one rejects, to the contrary, the doctrine of “real essences,” then one has to reject the ontological argument as well: since essences are nothing but concepts (having at most an existence in the mind), the transition from the concept of God to his existence has to be rejected.

Secondly, Descartes’ answer to the logical objection is successful only if he is able to show that his definition of God is a real and not a nominal one, only – that is – if the concept of God as *ens perfectissimum* succeeds in picking out a true essence and not just a name. This amounts to showing, in Descartes’ own terminology, that the idea of God as the most perfect being is an “innate idea” and not a “factitious” (arbitrary) one.

In his reply to Caterus (who opposed Aquinas’ logical objection to the proof in the *Fifth Meditation*), Descartes says:

My argument however was as follows: “That which we clearly and distinctly understand to belong to the true and immutable nature, or essence, or form of something, can truly be asserted of that thing. But once we have made a sufficiently careful investigation of what God is, we clearly and distinctly understand that existence belongs to his true and immutable nature. Hence we can now truly assert of God that he does exist” (AT VII: 115–116/CSM II: 83).

Descartes emphasizes that we may assert the existence of God only «once we have made a careful investigation of what God is (*quid sit Deus*)», and this is a necessary condition that he himself imposes on his own way of proceeding in demonstrating, because «according to the laws of true logic, we must never ask about the existence (*an sit*) of anything until we first understand his essence (*quid sit*)» (AT VII: 107–108/CSM II: 78)¹⁹.

4.4. The Young Leibniz between Descartes and Gassendi

In his dismissal of Descartes’ proof, we have seen that the young Leibniz points out that the question of the *an sit* has been left unanswered by Descartes, for he just presupposed the existence of the most perfect being rather than

of mathematical objects presented in the *Principles of Philosophy* (cf. AT VIII-1: 27–28). For a discussion, see Brown (1980); Nolan (1997).

18 Cf. Scribano (1994: 41–57). My reading of Descartes is heavily indebted to Scribano’s masterful work.

19 Reversing the order of priority established in the Aristotelian tradition, according to which knowing the existence of a thing is preliminary to knowing its essence (cf. *Posterior Analytics*, II, i, 89b, 31–35), Descartes proposes a new kind of logic, in which the possibility of knowing the essence of something must precede the possibility of knowing the existence of that very same thing; cf. AT VII: 107–108/CSM II: 78.

proving it. In so doing, Leibniz comes closer to the main objection that Gassendi brought to Descartes. Among the criteria Descartes established to check if an idea (as the idea of the most perfect being) is an innate one or not, one is especially relevant to our discussion. It is based on the fact that the essence of a thing has a logical structure, by means of which some of its properties have to be explained in terms of other, more fundamental properties thereof. A distinction is proposed between the nature (essence) of a thing “narrowly conceived” and the nature (essence) of a thing “broadly conceived”²⁰: the nature of a thing narrowly conceived is just its principal attribute (e.g., a triangle is a rectilinear figure having three angles); its nature broadly conceived contains properties that the thing has in virtue of having its principal attribute (e.g. the property that the sum of the internal angles of a triangle is equal to two right angles).

Broadly conceived properties constitute a class of properties that have to be analytically derived from the content of an innate idea in a non-trivial or non-tautological way (see AT VII: 67–68). Descartes claims he is not fashioning the idea of God as already containing the notion of existence in itself, otherwise the derivation of existence from the notion of God would be trivial (existence would be a narrowly conceived property and the idea of God would not be innate). In this way, Descartes claims that his proof is not reducible to the tautological claim that “an existent x exists” (where x stands for “the most perfect being” in this case).

On this point, however, Gassendi correctly remarks that even this assumption does not make Descartes’ proof successful. Otherwise, he says, one could say that the idea of a perfect winged horse contains not just the perfection of his having wings but also the perfection of existence. For just as God is thought of as perfect in every kind of perfection, so the winged horse is thought of as perfect in its own kind (AT VII: 325/CSM II: 226, transl. mod.). Gassendi’s claim that Descartes’ proof is only a *petitio principii* assumes that existence is a perfection or a property, but only for the sake of the hypothesis. As is well known, in fact, the main objection Gassendi brings to Descartes is based exactly on this: the analogy between God’s existence and the properties of the triangle falls short just because, in the case of the triangle the comparison is just one between two essences. On the contrary, in the case of God, Descartes is comparing essence with existence, which is a category mistake, because «existence is not a perfection either in God or in anything else; it is that without which no perfection can be present [...] and if a thing lacks existence, we do not say it is imperfect [...], but say instead that it is nothing at all»(AT VII: 323/CSM II: 224–225).

It should be pointed out that in the passage from the *Specimen* quoted above, Leibniz neither states that existence is not a perfection nor presents it as

20 See Griffin (2013: 21); see also Scribano (1994: 50–55).

a property of a thing. Although he is silent on this point, I suspect that Leibniz would share Gassendi's view in this case. One reason is that he clearly endorses Gassendi's other two main claims against Descartes' argument, i.e., the illegitimacy of moving from existence in the mind to real existence, and the claim that the ontological argument is question begging. This similarity between the young Leibniz's approach and Gassendi's clearly emerges from a quick comparison with Gassendi's reply to Descartes in the *Disquisitio Metaphysica* (1644), which could be regarded as the most proximate source of Leibniz's early rejection of the ontological argument²¹.

In the *Disquisitio*, Gassendi's rejection of the Cartesian proof is presented as an argument articulated in three different steps; this text represents one of the sharpest and most penetrating criticisms of the ontological argument ever written. First of all, (1) he attacks the assumption that existence is a perfection, showing that it can be conceived neither as a property of a thing (*res*) nor as a property of a being (*ens*) whatsoever. The argument is that if existence were a property a thing may have or not, one could subtract existence from that thing and still have something "real" (i.e., a non-existing thing), which is absurd. In this sense, Gassendi accepts the principle that "reality" and "actual existence" amounts to one and the same thing, which immediately leads to the rejection of any metaphysics of "real essences" or "true and immutable natures"²².

Secondly, (2) he uses the "logical objection" to reject Descartes's passage from clear and distinct conceivability of existence as a property of God to the conclusion that God exists *a parte rei* (i.e., *in rerum natura*). What is particularly interesting here is that the inference from existence in the mind (*in idea* or *in intellectu*) to real and actual existence is criticized because it leads to a proliferation of the ontological arguments: for we could ascribe to the "golden mountain" whatever property we clearly and distinctly understand to pertain to its "true and immutable nature".

Then, in the last step, (3) Gassendi draws the conclusion that, since Descartes has not proved that existence (conceived as belonging to the idea of God) could be attributed to God in reality, that is, that a most perfect being can really be given *a parte rei* (and not just in the mind), his whole argument is reduced to the

21 Leibniz's first philosophy is heavily indebted to authors like Hobbes and Gassendi. In 1675, in a letter to Foucher, he said that «Bacon and Gassendi were the first [among the new philosophers] to fall into my hands» (A II 1²: 389/AG 2). In a late letter to Rémond, he confesses that at that time (1714), Gassendi's opinion pleased him much less than when he, as a young student, abandoned the philosophy of the Schools (GP III 620). On the influence of Gassendi's atomism on the young Leibniz, see Moll (1982). On the late Leibniz's reception of Gassendi, see Michel Fichant (1997a).

22 For Gassendi's rejection of Descartes' account of essences, cf. P. Gassendi, *Disquisitio Metaphysica seu Dubitationes et Instantiae adversus Renati Cartesii Metaphysicam et Responsa* (1644), 236–238. On Gassendi's nominalist stance, see Bloch (1971: 121–132). For an overview of Gassendi's criticism of Cartesian metaphysics, see Lolordo (2023).

question-begging claim that the most perfect being exists because existence has been assumed as already included in the idea of God. Just as in the case of the concept of an “existing golden mountain”, one derives the trivial conclusion that a golden mountain exists²³.

4.5. The Ontological Argument Reconsidered: *Probatio Existentiae Dei ex Ejus Essentia* (1678)

In the *Specimen* Leibniz explicitly endorses points (2) and (3) of Gassendi’s strategy, which seems enough to me to conclude that he would also accept point (1), i.e., the rejection of existence as a property of objects (or a property of individuals). This point might be further clarified by considering the way in which the notion of existence is characterized in the writings of this period. I will say something about this in the last part of this chapter (§4.6). By now, we can already see the main differences between Leibniz’s views in the Mainz period and his later approach to the ontological argument. Leaving aside the concept of existence, we can already see that he will modify his views both about (2) and (3).

As far as point (2) is concerned, he will try to bypass Aquinas’ objection to the knowability for us (*quoad nos*) of the divine essence, by changing the very meaning of it, and, thus, ascribing to Aquinas the very same objection that he (Leibniz) brought to Descartes.

This is unambiguously stated in a text written around 1684–85:

Whatever can be demonstrated from the definition of a thing can be predicated of that thing. Now from the definition of God [...] there follows his existence, for existence is a perfection, and whatever possesses existence will therefore be greater or more perfect than it would be without it. Therefore, existence can be predicated of God, or God exists. This argument, revived by Descartes, was defended by one of the old Scholastics [Anselm] [...]. But following some others, Thomas replied to it that this presupposes that God is (*Deum esse*), or, as I interpret this, that he has an essence, at least in the sense that the rose has an essence in the winter, or that such a concept is possible (A VI 4: 541–542/L 231, italics mine).

In 1684, then, Leibniz clearly (and perhaps deliberately) misinterprets the sense of Aquinas’ objection, as is evident from the fact that the expression *esse in rerum natura*, which Aquinas applies to actual existence only, is now interpreted essentially rather than existentially²⁴. Leibniz interprets it as if Aquinas’ claim that the supporter of the ontological argument “presupposed that God

23 Cf. Gassendi, *Disquisitio*, 251–256, especially 256 where he summarizes his three points: Descartes’ proof is a paralogism because he (1) assumes existence as a perfection; (2) confuses existence in the mind with real existence; and (3) assumes existence in order to prove existence itself.

24 See also a later text, *An Jus Naturae sit Aeternum*, ca. 1695: «Concerning eternal things, every time we ask if they are (*an sint*), it is not asked whether they have existence, but whether they

is” amounted to the claim that God “has an essence”, also adding that such a claim has to be interpreted as referring to what is barely possible (as in the case of the “rose in the winter”)²⁵.

Between what he said in the *Specimen* and his considerations in the 1680s, Leibniz has changed his mind on several points of his philosophy. Reconsidering the ontological argument in the Paris notes, for instance, Leibniz started to regard what is possible in itself as something having a proper (even if diminished) ontological status, i.e., as a true essence. In this way, he was able to conclude that, provided that a real definition of a concept can be given (showing its possibility, i.e., absence of internal contradiction), that concept designates an essence *a parte rei*, and, thus, the transition from possibility to actuality might be regarded as a legitimate one from essence to existence²⁶.

To better understand this fundamental turning point in Leibniz’s philosophy, we should have a look at a very important text written at the beginning of 1678, where not only his reply to (2) – the logical objection – but also his reconsideration of (3) – the claim that the Cartesian proof is circular, being able to show only that God necessarily exists if he exists (in the sense explained above) – are explicitly at work. In the *Probatio Existentiae Dei ex Ejus Essentia*, Leibniz makes the following remark about the charge of circularity:

Eternal truths are not to be considered in this argument as hypothetically assuming actual existence, for otherwise we would have a circular argument. That is, from the assumed existence of God his existence would be proved. Of course, in saying that the essence of God involves existence, it must not be understood that if God exists he necessarily exists, but in this way: *a parte rei*, even if no one thinks about it, it is unconditionally (*nulla conditione facta*), absolutely and purely true that the essence and the existence of God are inseparably connected in that region of essences or ideas. (A II 1²: 590/LST 185)

Following Hobbes, the young Leibniz had defended a conditional reading of eternal truths, one in which the existence of the subject to which the proposition refers is only hypothetically assumed (see Chapter 3 above). It was somehow natural, therefore, to conclude that there is no chance to derive the

have an essence, i.e., not if they are actually existing, but if they are possible, which means if they have a real idea, i.e., a real definition» (Grua 637).

25 See Cramer (1990). Cramer dubs Leibniz’s interpretation of Aquinas “semantic objection”, interpreting it as a charitable reading of the logical objection. For a criticism of Cramer, however, see Scribano (1994: 159–160). The “rose in the winter” was a traditional example of a non-actualized possible’s having a real essence (also mentioned by Descartes to Burman, in order to defend the real distinction between essence and existence, cf. AT V: 164). This concept was harshly criticized by the young Leibniz in his remarks on Daniel Stahl; cf. A VI 1: 23, and see Chapter 2 above.

26 Cf. *Definitio Dei seu Entis a se*, A VI 3: 582–583/DSR 105–107. On the notion of the possible, cf. Rateau (2019: 94–102), as well as my remarks in Chapter 6 below.

existence of something from its notion. Now, however, by linking the demonstration of the existence of God to the ontological status of eternal truths, Leibniz wants to emphasize that the connection between essence and existence in the case of God is one which holds *a parte rei*, i.e., independently of our thought, and unconditionally.

The sense of this connection holding in the region of essences is clarified in the following passage:

As in the region of the eternal truths, or in the realm of ideas that exist *a parte rei*, there subsist unity, the circle, power, equality, heat, the rose, and other realities or forms or perfections, even if no individual beings exist, and these universals are not thought about; so also there is found, among other forms or objective realities, actual existence, not as it is found in the world of examples, but as some kind of universal form, which, if it is inseparably connected with some other essence or form in the realm of ideas, results in a being necessarily existing in fact. (A II 1²: 590/LST 185)

In this rather Platonic framework, essences are explicitly understood as universals, and are contrasted with *entia singularia* that exist in the world as particular instances of the former (*in exemplis*)²⁷. This distinction is important, especially as far as divine existence is concerned, because the latter is the kind of existence which is said to be found in the region of essences «as some kind of universal form», and contrasted with the existence of finite and contingent entities. Taken in the first sense, existence is inseparably connected with those other forms that constitute the essence of God, and this is the sense in which this proof is said to be unconditional. This very notion of existence as a “universal form”, however, proves to be quite obscure, and, as far as I know, is not clarified here or elsewhere²⁸.

27 The version of the ontological argument given in the *Probatio* is discussed at length in Adams (1994: 136–141); cf. also Di Bella (1994); Griffin (2013: 39–49).

28 In a text of the Paris period, Leibniz states that God is the subject of all simple, absolute, and affirmative forms, and is thus eternal (absolutely enduring), omnipotent (absolutely active), and so on, also including that «He is absolutely existent, or, perfect. [...] That to which existence is ascribed absolutely, i.e., existence without some determining addition (*existentia sine additione determinante*), has ascribed to it as much existence as can be ascribed, i.e., the greatest existence» (A VI 3: 520/DSR 79); see also a later text on the nature of the infinite, tentatively dated around 1696, where, existence in this sense, however, is equated with duration: «if one attributes to something a diffusion of presence, and supposes that no reason is assigned for it to have definite bounds, it will be immense or everywhere; if existence or duration is accorded to it, and nothing further of this kind is added in it, it will be eternal or necessary; finally, whenever simple and pure reality is understood, by that very fact is constituted the Maximum possible in things, or absolute infinite, in which duration, diffusion, power, cognition, and anything at all that is in it, lacks limits, and in turn anything that can lack limits is in it» (LH XXXV, 7, 10, Bl. 7r; in Arthur–Ottaviani 2025: 155).

The logical objection falls short when possibility is no longer interpreted in merely conceptual terms, but as “possible existence”, i.e., something which immediately corresponds to an essence, that is, something having an ontological status on its own, to the effect that the transition (*transitus*) is now regarded as one from being (“possible existence”) to being (“actual existence”), not from thought to being²⁹.

Interestingly, the only thing that Leibniz retains of his old criticism is the belief that the Cartesian version of the argument is invalid just because it moves from a bare concept and not from a genuine essence («Cartesians work with conceptions and ideas alone, but they do not adequately bring out the force of the argument», A II 1²: 590/LST 184). This is why he turns the charge of circularity against the Cartesian proof, this time against the version given by Descartes in the “Geometric Exposition” (in the *Replies to the Second Objections*), based on the claim that «it is the same to say that something is contained in the nature or concept of some thing, as to say that that very something is true about that thing» (A II 1²: 591/LST 186). The difference, however, is that Leibniz is now charging Descartes and the Cartesians for a different reason (with respect to what he said in 1671), i.e., for grounding the main premise of the proof on «conceptions and ideas alone», which means nominal definitions, without being able to provide a real definition showing that the concept of God is possible, i.e., without a preliminary proof of the possibility of the concept of God as the most perfect (or necessary) being.

4.6. Two Views on Essence and Existence

Even though Leibniz, in his writings of the late 1670s, radically disagrees with Descartes as far as ideas and definitions are concerned, he nonetheless sides with him in embracing a sort of Platonic theory of essences as the fundamental premise for the renewal of the ontological argument³⁰. In 1671, by contrast, Leibniz had been very explicit in pointing out that Descartes «has not yet proved that God is perfect in the sense that he already exists; this in turn rests on the question whether he exists (*an sit*)», where reference to the *an sit* unambiguously shows that the presupposition involved here is that of God’s existence, not of his essence. This is why, in the *Demonstrationum Catholicarum Conspectus* he considered Descartes’ proof as a “paralogism”. Thus, the young Leibniz was closer to the letter and the spirit of Aquinas’ criticism of the ontological proof

29 The idea of possibility as “possible existence” and the ontology of *transitus* have to be understood in connection to Leibniz’s doctrine of “striving possibles”; see Griffin (2013: 49–57) and my discussion in Chapter 9 below.

30 About the Descartes-Gassendi controversy, in his letter to Rémond of July 1714, Leibniz will note: «Concerning the disputes which have occurred between Gassendi and Descartes, I have found that Gassendi is correct to reject some of Descartes’ supposed proofs of God and the soul; however, in the main, I believe that the views of Descartes are preferable, even though they have not been adequately proven» (GP III 621, italics mine).

than he will be in his later texts. This is not surprising if one bears in mind that the kind of Platonic metaphysics grounding the ontological argument could not have been accepted by an Aristotelian philosopher like Aquinas, for whom grounding existence in possibility would be a complete reversal of the correct order of explanation.

There is a feature in Aquinas' objection, moreover, with which nominalist thinkers, such as Hobbes, Gassendi, and the young Leibniz, should not have had a problem: this is Aquinas' emphasis on the fact that we always deal with a nominal definition of God rather than with a real one (for the vision of the real essence of God is reserved only to the blessed ones). In this sense, nominalism about essences could be regarded as a sort of radical generalization (or degeneration) of Aquinas' originally nominalist concern about the specific case of the concept of God³¹. If existence is taken not as a first-order property but as that without which the subject itself (the bearer of all perfections) is nothing at all, then the transition from God's being absolutely perfect to his being *tout court* can only be considered a question-begging argument (one presupposing the very same conclusion it should prove).

These considerations may also be helpful in correctly understanding the evolution of Leibniz's views about the relationship between essence and existence. I have already shown that, in Leibniz's early philosophy, the only extant account is one in which existence (taken as a shorthand for the concrete and individual ontological subjects) is placed outside of the scope of demonstrative knowledge (*scientia*). From this point of view, the failure of the ontological argument is an indirect proof of the fact that, at this earlier stage of Leibniz's thought, existence is not placed at the level of conceptual analysis: what reason can establish is only that, e.g., if something is a "man", then it is also an "animal", but the fact that a man (something which is both "man" and "animal") is actually given (out there, so to say) can only be established at another level, that of sensible perception. The task of providing a definition of existence, therefore, cannot be accomplished at the conceptual level alone. The question of establishing what actually exists shifts, accordingly, from the level of predication and conceptual analysis to that of perception and sensible knowledge, i.e., experience. At this level, however, the main problem is that of providing a set of criteria to distinguish (in a more or less pragmatic way) what is real from what is barely imaginary (dreams, hallucinations, and so on), or, to use Leibniz's own terminology, to distinguish real phenomena from imaginary ones.

For this reason, the account of existence most favoured in Leibniz's earlier texts is by far the one in which existence is accounted for in terms of "distinct perception". When he wants to be extremely rigorous, indeed, Leibniz emphasizes that sensible perception (or, better still, "distinct perceivability", which

31 On Hobbes' position, see my remarks in Chapter 3; see also Zarka (1987: 146–148), and Paganini (2013).

requires a combination of both sense perception and intellectual knowledge), has to be understood as the *mark* of existence, i.e., as an epistemic criterion rather than as a definition³². The early Leibniz's research programme, as far as I understand it, was to leave aside (provisionally, at least) all the problems related to the definition of existence (to any *a priori* characterization of it), resorting only to an *a posteriori* account, based on the mutual coherence of sense perceptions.

The very need to make an explicit distinction between the *a priori* and the *a posteriori* account of existence is perhaps something that came to Leibniz's mind only once he had started to shape his new metaphysics of real essences, as well as an ontology including both actual and barely possible entities. Evidence in this sense can be found in a late passage, where he notes: «I once defined an entity as whatever is distinctly thinkable, and existent as what is distinctly sensible or perceivable. Explaining the matter *a priori*, an entity is whatever is possible, but there actually exists whatever is in the best series of possible things»³³. It must be emphasized that it is only according to the *a priori* account that existence is conceived in terms of actuality, and contrasted to essence as conceived in terms of possibility. As Leibniz himself points out: «*A priori*, however, the principle of existence is another one, namely what harmonizes (*consentit*) with what is the most perfect, that is with something which, had it not been [posited], the series of things would not be the most perfect one» (A VI 4: 865). Unlike the *a posteriori* account, the *a priori* account presupposes an ontological reading of possibilities, i.e., one in which a concept's being logically possible (non-contradictory) is the mark that such a concept involves a genuine essence. As I have already pointed out, the young Leibniz did not need to link together possibility and essence: «We call possible [...] everything which is understood in a clear and distinct way, and there is no other criterion of possibility [...] available to mankind other than existence itself» (A VI 1: 472). The necessity of linking together conceivability, possibility, and essence will become unavoidable, however, after Leibniz's reappraisal of the ontological argument, when the relation between essence and existence is explicitly modelled on that between possibility and actuality.

The ontological foundation of the notion of possibility is required in order to distinguish genuine metaphysical possibilities from pure mental fictions, and it is not by chance that the exigency of such a distinction became compelling once Leibniz started reconsidering the ontological argument, thus emphasizing the necessity of a proof of possibility in order to show that the concept involved in the proof (“the most perfect being”) represents a genuine essence and not just a fiction of our mind.

32 See A VI 3: 464 and 474 for two very explicit passages in this sense. These texts are discussed in Chapter 5 below.

33 *Notationes quaedam ad Aloysii Temik Philosophiam*, ca. 1715–16, LH IV, 8, Bl. 61v; published in Mugnai (1992: 158).

Chapter 5. Distinct Perceivability as the Mark of Existence. Leibniz's Phenomenology of Existence (1667/1676)

5.1. Leibniz's *A Posteriori* Account of Existence

In the first volume of his *Mémoire sur la Philosophie de Leibniz*, published posthumously in 1905, Alexandre Foucher de Careil published a very interesting text by Leibniz which he suggested had been drafted at the beginning of Leibniz's career (around 1666). This seems to be a mistake, however, as I will show in what follows. Unfortunately, the manuscript of this text seems to be lost and Foucher did not quote the whole text in the original Latin text, but only his French translation with some passages in Latin added between brackets¹. This is a pity for our present purposes because this text deals explicitly with the notion of existence.

Let me quote from Foucher de Careil's translation of the text (and Leibniz's original when possible):

I believed that he who aspires to find the principles of things must begin by considering existence: I spent whole days meditating on this notion of existence. Finally, I found that we, as human beings, can only affirm what we sense (we also sense things whose effects and causes we feel, as when a stone is thrown from a high position, and yet we do not see the author). We reconcile the things we have sensed before, or at least we think we can. This is why we do not believe in dreams when we are awake. But I could see that there was or must be something else in nature. For if I were alone in the world and I were supposed to be taken out of it, things would not perish with me. But however much I imagined other principles, I believed that all this related to essence and not to existence, and that I could find no other clear notion of existence than that of being sensed. Thus, I concluded that the existence of things consists in being sensed by an infallible mind of which we are only the emanations, that is to say, by God².

1 Foucher de Careil (1905: 10–13).

2 «Je vis que celui qui aspire à trouver les principes des choses, devait commencer par la considération de l'existence: je me fatiguai des jours entiers à méditer sur cette notion de l'existence (*Ordinandum ab ipsius existentiae consideratione credidi ad principia rerum aspiranti: integros dies fatigavi inquirendo in notionem existentiae*). Enfin je trouvai que nous autres hommes ne pouvions affirmer que ce que nous sentons, (nous sentons aussi des choses dont nous ressentons les effets et les causes, comme quand on jette une pierre d'une elevation, et que cependant nous n'en voyons pas l'auteur). Les choses que nous avons ressenties auparavant, nous les concilions, ou du moins nous croyons pouvoir le faire. De là vient que nous ne croyons pas aux songes quand nous veillons. Mais je voyais cependant qu'il existait ou devait exister nécessairement quelque chose d'autre dans la nature. Car si j'étais seule au monde et que par supposition je vinsse à être enlevé de ce monde, les choses ne périraient pas pour cela avec moi. Mais

As one can see, Leibniz is writing a sort of autobiographical sketch of his earlier philosophical views, as is made clear by the use of the past tense, and this makes Foucher de Careil's suggestion of an earlier dating quite implausible. Be that as it may, many of the observations contained in this text resonate with the account of existence that one can find in Leibniz's earlier writings as well as in his Paris writings. Leibniz seems, moreover, to establish a sort of distinction between the first steps of his philosophical reflections and his further progress on the same topic. It is true that even in later texts he assumed existence as the starting point of his philosophy, i.e., as a way to introduce the metaphysical question of why something exists rather than nothing³. The passage quoted above makes it clear, however, that the young Leibniz was able to ground existence only in sensibility or perception, all the other principles being related to essence rather than to existence.

These other principles (related to essence rather than to existence) deal with the reason why this world has been created by God, as the continuation of the passage explains:

But considering carefully why this was necessarily so, I saw that we sense things much less as done than as to be done. For no other reason could be found why such things exist and not such others, that is to say, because they are perceived by the primary intelligence, if this intelligence were a purely passive one. And then I understood why the intelligence perceives the one rather than the other, and why such things exist rather than such others, and if God prefers them, the cause is that the one is more harmonious (*ἁρμονικώτερον*) than the other. Thus, I found that the intimate principle of things was universal harmony. I defined harmony as diversity compensated by identity. From this I also derived bodies, space and time. For the body is that in which many things are sensed simultaneously or what is extended. The mind is one in many things, i.e., it is what perceives harmony, that is pleasure, or pain which is the lack of harmony, which however is only partial, because there is no lack of universal harmony in the world. It follows that God cannot perceive pain because there is no lack of universal harmony. God is one, omniscient and omnipotent⁴.

j'avais beau imaginer d'autres principes, je croyais que tout cela se rapportait à l'essence et non à l'existence, et que je ne pourrais trouver aucune autre notion claire de l'existence que celle d'être sentie. J'en conclus: que l'existence des choses consiste à être sentie par un esprit infaillible dont nous ne sommes que les effluves, c'est à dire par Dieu (*Ergo conclusi: existentias rerum mente quadam infallibili sentiri, cujus nos tantum effluvia essemus, id est Deo*)» (Foucher de Careil 1905: 10–11).

- 3 Cf. a text dated ca. 1700: «In doing philosophy I assume that something exists; and since nothing is without a reason, there must be a reason why something exists rather than nothing, and this reason must be founded in a necessary being (*In philosophando assumo, aliquid existere, unde cum nihil sit sine ratione, oportet rationem esse cur aliquid potius existat quam nihil, eamque rationem fundari in Re necessaria*)» (LH IV, 3, 5e, Bl. 30r).
- 4 «Mais considérant attentivement pourquoi il en était nécessairement ainsi, je vis que nous sentons les choses beaucoup moins comme faites que comme à faire. On ne pourrait en effet

Of course, that God and universal harmony (or, also, God *qua* universal harmony) are the ultimate principles of reality had already been stated by Leibniz in his 1671 letter to Wedderkopf (A II 1²: 185–187/CP 3–5) and it will be repeated many times in the following years⁵. The same can be said about the characterization of universal harmony as *identitas diversitate compensata*⁶.

Here, however, I would like to emphasize the distinction between two ways of making sense of existence: an epistemic (or phenomenological) one, on the one hand, and on the other a metaphysical one, which is also discussed in a couple of passages I briefly mentioned at the end of Chapter 4.

In his late remarks on Temmik (ca. 1715–16), for example, Leibniz writes as follows:

I once defined an entity as whatever is distinctly thinkable, and existent as what is distinctly sensible or perceivable. Explaining the matter *a priori*, an entity is whatever is possible, but there actually exists whatever is in the best series of possible things⁷.

trouver d'autre raison à ce que telles choses existent et non telles autres, c'est-à-dire soient perçues par l'intelligence première, si cette intelligence restait purement passive. Et alors je compris pourquoi l'intelligence perçoit l'une plutôt que l'autre, et pourquoi telles choses existent plutôt que telles autres, et si elle les préfère, la cause en est que les unes sont plus harmoniques que les autres (*alia aliis sint ἁρμονικώτερα*). Je trouvais donc que le principe intime des choses était l'harmonie universelle (*principium ergo intimum rerum reperiri esse harmoniam universalem*). Je définissais l'harmonie, la diversité compensée par l'identité (*harmoniam autem definebam diversitatem identitatem compensatam*). J'en dérivais aussitôt le corps, l'espace et le temps (*hinc statim corpora, spatium, tempus derivabam*). Le corps est ce en quoi beaucoup de choses sont senties simultanément ou ce qui est étendu. L'esprit est un en plusieurs, c'est ce qui perçoit l'harmonie ou le plaisir ou le manque de plaisir (*anharmoniam*) ou douleur, qui est toujours partiel, car il n'y a pas d'anharmonie universelle dans le monde. Il s'ensuivait que Dieu ne pouvait être susceptible de douleur puisqu'il n'existe pas d'anharmonie universelle. Dieu est un, sachant tout, pouvant tout» (Foucher de Careil 1905: 11–12).

- 5 For instance, concerning the Greek expression *ἁρμονικώτερα*, used to express the maximal degree of harmony of the actual world, see A VI 3: 146 (CP 101) and A VI 4: 1637. Cf. also to Des Bosses 29 April 1715, GP II 496.
- 6 Cf. the texts discussed by Piro (1990: 97–106). On the notion of “universal harmony” see the very stimulating paper by Mondadori (1978). See also Schneiders (1984), and my remarks in Chapter 8 below.
- 7 «Ens olim defini, quicquid distincte cogitabile est, Existens quod distincte sensibile seu perceptibile est. A priori rem explicando, Ens est quicquid possibile est, actu vero existit, quicquid optimae possibilitatis seriei inest» (*Notationes quaedam ad Aloysii Temmik Philosophiam*, ca. 1715–16, LH IV, 8, Bl. 61v; Mugnai 1992: 158). See also *De illatione et veritate atque de terminis* (ca. 1687–96): «A perception which is consistent, i.e. that involves no contradiction, is the notion of existence. [...] A priori, there is another principle of existence, namely, agreement with the most perfect, namely that without which the series of things would not be the most perfect (*Perceptio autem consentiens seu quae nullam contradictionem involvit Existentiae est notio. [...] A priori aliud principium Existentiae est, nempe consentiens perfectissimo, seu quo non [positio] series rerum non esset perfectissima*)» (A VI 4: 865).

It is easy to see that what Leibniz calls the *a priori* characterization of essence and existence is explicitly stated in a modal way (where essence is equated with possibility), whereas the *a posteriori* characterization is based on the notion of distinct sensibility or perceptibility. To be more precise, in his very early years, the distinction between essence and existence was understood as one completely internal to the notion of sensation, for the very notion of “being” (*ens*) was understood in terms of sensibility.

In his youthful *Nova Methodus Discendae Docendaeque Jurisprudentiae* (1667), Leibniz proposed the following definition of being: «That which has sensible qualities, or is sensible, is called a *being* (*Ens*). And this is the most perfect definition of being [...]. Qualities taken together at the same time (or imaginability) constitute *essence*, sensibility constitutes *existence*» (§33, First part, A VI 1: 285/L 88)⁸. The distinction between conceivability and perceivability will be emphasized in the corrections and additions prepared by Leibniz in 1697 for a republication of the text which never ultimately materialized⁹. I will return to this point a little later.

Let me first add that a similar issue seems to have been raised by Leibniz already in a letter to Simon Foucher (written in Paris in 1675) wherein, after having presented his phenomenological account of existence and discussed the question of the existence of the external world (see below), he adds his argument (based on the mutual connection of phenomena): «This permanent consistency [of phenomena] gives us great assurance, but after all, it will be only

8 The idea that the essence of a thing corresponds to the sum of its sensible qualities can be enlightened by what Leibniz says in the *Specimen Demonstrationum de Natura Rerum Corporarum*, ca. 1671: «The nature of a thing is the cause of appearances in the thing itself. Hence the nature of a thing differs from its phenomena as a distinct appearance differs from a confused one, and as the appearance of parts differs from the appearance of their positions or relations to the outside; or, again, as the plan of a city, looked down from the top of a great tower placed upright in its midst differs from the almost infinite horizontal perspectives with which it delights the eyes of the travellers who approach it from one direction or another. This analogy has always seemed excellently fitted for understanding the distinction between nature and accidents» (A VI 2: 303–304/L 142, transl. mod.). Cf. Leibniz’s 1671 letter to Arnauld, where he says that «a substantial form differs from its qualities only in relation to sense» (A II 1²: 276/GP I 69). But see already Leibniz’s letter to J. Thomasius, October 1666, A II 1²: 18, and April 1669, A II 1²: 28–29, where Leibniz introduces the metaphor of the town; cf. the commentary on this passage in Bodéüs’s edition (Bodéüs 1993: 180ff).

9 «So that, in relation to us, it can be said that the *essence* of a thing for us is its distinct conceivability (or imaginability), the *existence* is its distinct perceivability (or sensibility). For the composite of the qualities taken together, or, which is the same, conceivability, constitutes the essence of a thing; whereas perceivability (which, of course, does not coincide with a thing’s being actually perceived) proves its existence. Here “sensation” and “imagination” are taken in a broad sense, as referring, respectively, to every perception and concept (*Ut adeo nostri respectu dici possit* Essentiam rei nobis esse conceptibilitatem (seu imaginabilitatem) rejus distinctam, Existentiam ejus perceptibilitatem (seu sensibilitatem) distinctam. Nempe qualitatum simul sumtarum compositum seu conceptibilitas constituit rei essentiam; perceptibilitas (ut scilicet per rem non stet quominus actu sentiatur) existentiam ejus probat. Sumitur hic autem late sensio et imaginatio, pro omni perceptione et conceptu)» (A VI 1: 285); cf. also another correction to the text printed in A VI 2: 555.

moral until somebody discovers *a priori* the origin of the world which we see and pursues the question of why things are as they appear back to its foundations in essence» (A II 1²: 391/L 154). This notion of “moral certainty” will be further investigated throughout this chapter and the next.

In this chapter, I will investigate Leibniz’s earlier account of existence, moving from his drafts for the (never-to-be-realized) project of the *Elementa de mente et de corpore*, which could be regarded as one of his earliest attempts at grounding a philosophy of non-material, mind-like entities. One of the most important features of this earlier attempt is that it cannot be considered in isolation from Leibniz’s theory of bodies grounded in his early physical theory.

To understand this point more fully, notice that the closest parallel to the passage quoted by Foucher de Careil is to be found in a text edited with the title *Propositiones quaedam physicae* (ca. 1672) and probably drafted at the beginning of Leibniz’s Paris period:

When I have more deeply inquired into the nature not only of extension, but also of existence in general, it seems to me to have discovered this: that to exist is nothing else than to be perceived (*Sentiri*); to be perceived, however, if not by us, at least from the author of things, to be perceived by whom is nothing else than to please him, i.e., to be harmonious. This is why many perceptions are in agreement (*concordantes*) or congruent, as in the case of music. Posited that existing consists in being perceived, it is necessary that a body is, i.e., exists; that there is something which affects the sense, from which the sense is moved or, at least, is forced to move (*conari*), because, if everything were at rest, God himself would not be able to distinguish them from what is nothing. (A VI 3: 56).¹⁰

The idea that the existence of bodies can be explained in terms of mutual agreement among the perceptions of different souls (or substances) is not regarded as being in conflict with the idea that it is necessary that bodies exist insofar as there is something which affects our sense organs and, in so doing, produces a reaction, i.e., an effort toward change or motion (what Leibniz calls

10 Cf. also A VI 3: 100–101 (LoC 17); 466 (LoC 31); 588 (DSR 113). The idea that bodies in motion must exist otherwise God would not be able to distinguish them from nothing is also echoed in the continuation of the passage quoted by Foucher de Careil: «It is mathematically certain that circulation in the body is a motion. From this I inferred that if all things moved in the same way – for example, along parallel lines – nothing would be in motion, everything would be in perfect rest. Everything consists in harmony or proportion. Likewise, if one supposes that in a body everything increases proportionally, everything will remain in the same state in relation to one another (*Il est de certitude mathématique que la circulation dans le corps est un mouvement. J’en dérivais que si toutes les choses se mouvaient de la même manière, soit par exemple selon des lignes parallèles, rien ne serait en mouvement, tout serait dans un parfait repos. Tout consiste en harmonie ou proportion. De même si l’on suppose que dans un corps tout augmente proportionnellement, tout restera dans le même état l’un vis à vis de l’autre*)» (Foucher de Careil 1905: 12). Cf. also Leibniz’s letter to Simon Foucher, 1675, A II 1²: 390.

a *conatus*)¹¹. As I will show in what follows, Leibniz, in the Paris notes, will explicitly remark that we call a body whatever thing is perceived in a consistent way (either by us or by God), while space is that which brings it about that several perceptions cohere with each other at the same time (see A VI 3: 511).

5.2. Existence as Perceivability: The Limits of Leibniz's Phenomenalism

In the *Specimen Demonstrationum Rerum Corporearum ex Phaenomenis*, in the passage that immediately follows the criticism of the ontological argument discussed in the previous chapter, Leibniz adds the following remark:

Our reasoning is entirely different, although it does proceed from an idea in our mind to the truth of things. For it rests on these two propositions: "whatever is perceived clearly and distinctly is possible", and "whatever is immediately sensed is true", that is whatever the mind immediately perceives within itself, it perceives it truly. Hence, if the mind dreams that it is thinking, it will be truly thinking; however, it will not be truly seeing if it dreams it is seeing. (A VI 2: 306/L 144)

Leibniz here is assuming two main premises: (1) *Quicquid clare et distincte percipitur id possibile est*; and (2) *Quicquid immediate sentitur verum est*. Premise (1) corresponds, more or less, to the Cartesian passage from conceivability to possibility, while premise (2) is concerned with truth and, thus, existence. Premise (2) is also formulated by Leibniz in another way: *quicquid mens sentit in se, vere sensit*. This version has a clear phenomenalist flavour, as one can also understand from statements in the text along the following lines: when I dream that I am thinking of a tree, this amounts to say that I am really thinking of a tree, while, on the other hand, when I dream that I am seeing a tree, I am not really seeing a tree.

Here, as elsewhere in these early texts, the distinction between "thinking" and "perceiving" has not to be interpreted in terms of a distinction between the objects of pure understanding and the objects of sensibility. Leibniz's use of "perception" cannot be restricted to what is perceived only by external senses, but also includes the perception of the self (which he ascribes to the internal sense)¹². For instance, in the first draft of the *Accessio ad Arithmetica Infinitorum*, Leibniz lists a series of truths that cannot be regarded as arbitrary. The first class

11 The Hobbesian notion of sensation of *reactio durans* is clearly at work in Leibniz's early metaphysics and philosophy of nature. Cf. A VI 3: 510: «*Sensus quaedam reactio est*»; as well as in Leibniz's letter to Hobbes, July 1670, A II 1²: 92/L 106. On this topic, see Moll (1990); Hraoui (2023). Even many years later (when his monadological metaphysics will be already established), Leibniz will sometimes refer to sensation as *resistentia spiritalis*, as resistance can be called a sort of corporeal perception (*quasi perceptio corporea*). Cf. A VI: 7, 587, written in 1699.

12 Concerning the polarity between sensibility and imaginability (as related, respectively, to essence and existence) in §33 of the *Nova Methodus* (quoted above), Marine Picon has suggested to read it in terms of the Scholastic opposition between intuitive and abstractive knowledge (*notitia intuitiva* and *notitia abstractiva*), where the latter makes abstraction from existence,

is that of those truths which are proposed to the sense, like «*me a me sentiri sensientem*»; the second class is constituted by those truths which can be derived from those of the first class with the help of definitions, like the fact that from *me sentire* (or *me cogitare*), one can conclude *me esse*. The proof is sketched as follows:

For it is certain to the sense that I am perceived by myself when I perceive [something]. Therefore, the fact that I am perceiving is perceived immediately, or without a medium, for there is nothing between me and myself, i.e., in the mind. Whatever is immediately perceived without error – i.e., [whatever] follows from the fact that I am perceiving or, which is the same, from the proposition *I am perceiving (Ego sum sentiens)* – is true. Accordingly, I can invert it: *Perceiving that I am (sentiens ego sum)*” (A II 1²: 350).

In these years, the account of existence favoured by Leibniz is one made in terms of “distinct perception”. Despite some inaccuracies in his terminology, he never means to say that existence is identical to distinct perception or distinct perceptibility, as if “distinct perceptibility” had to be considered as the proper definition of existence. Rather he wants to say that distinct perceptibility is the *mark* of existence, i.e., as an epistemic criterion rather than a definition. In a passage from the Paris notes, for instance, he clearly writes that «consistent sensations are the mark of existence (*notam existentiae esse sensus conformes*)» (Feb. 1676, A VI 3: 474/DSR 25). And in another passage of the Paris period, Leibniz insists on this point introducing the topic of existence through a reference to the unreality of dreams:

When we dream of palaces, we rightly deny that they exist. Therefore, it is not the case that to exist is to be sensed. The distinction between our true and false sensation is simply that true sensations are consistent (*consentientes*), such as our predictions about eclipses. Sensation is not the existence of things, because we declare that there exist things which are not sensed. Further, the coherence of sensations must itself spring from some cause. Existence, therefore, is the quality of the subject which brings it about that we have coherent sensations. From this it can be understood that there are also existing things which are not sensed, since that quality can exist even if (because of our own deficiency) the thing is not sensed. That sensations themselves exist is something that we do not doubt – and therefore we also do not doubt that there is a sentient being, and a cause of sensation (Dec. 1675, A VI 3: 464/DSR 7–9)

This passage, even if written a few years after the period under consideration at this point in our study, is very useful to dispel some misunderstandings about Leibniz’s early phenomenalism. Notice, in particular, the distinction between having coherent perceptions as a criterion that allows us to distinguish between true and false (that is, deceitful) sensations, on the one hand, and, on the other, existence as «the quality of the subject which brings it about that we have

whereas the former characterizes our knowledge of an existent object *qua* existent; cf. Picon (2021: 174–175). On intuitive and abstractive knowledge, see below, Chapter 10.

coherent sensations». As regards the latter, Leibniz also says that we are allowed to derive the existence of a cause of sensations, even though, as it is clear, it has to be identified with a sentient being.

The best way to correctly understand Leibniz's characterization of existence in terms of "distinct" or "coherent perceptions" is to put it in its right place: the discussion concerning the reality of the external world (and, especially, of bodies outside us) is one which Leibniz inherits from the Cartesian tradition¹³.

Leibniz's programme, as far as I understand it, is to leave aside (at least, provisionally) all the problems related to the definition of existence, or, at least, with an *a priori* definition of it, where *a priori* has to be understood in the traditional, scholastic sense of an explanation that moves from the cause to the effect. In a sense, I think that the very need to distinguish between an *a priori* and *a posteriori* characterization of existence (the first formulated in logico-metaphysical terms, the second in phenomenological-epistemic ones) is something that came to Leibniz's mind (at least explicitly) only when he was already in possession of his metaphysics of real essences and his enlarged ontology (made up of real as well as ideal entities).

As the Parisian passages above show (see the reference to our ability to do scientific predictions, like in the case of eclipses), Leibniz's idea is that scientific explanation plays a prominent role in his account of the reality of phenomena. I think Adams is right when summarizing Leibniz's position as follows: «Real phenomena are those that form part of a coherent, *scientifically* adequate story [...]. That is the story that would be told, or approximated, by a perfect physical science. Imaginary phenomena are those that do not fit in this story»¹⁴.

5.3. Existence as Perceivability: The Leibnizian *Cogito* and the "Dream Argument"

This phenomenological perspective, as I will show, was already well established even before the Paris period, as is clear from a group of texts from the years 1670–71. Among a series of notes, we can find the following definitions:

(Existence) is the distinct sensibility of anything.

(Essence) is the distinct thinkability of anything.

Real is whatever is not only apparent.

Apparent is that whose sensibility is not distinct. (ca. 1671–72, A VI 2: 487–488)

13 Many authors have claimed that Leibniz's interest in this kind of problem was prompted by his familiarity with the post-Cartesian debate (think, for instance, of the Foucher-Malebranche debate), which took place during Leibniz's staying in Paris. In this sense, Leibniz's 1675 letter to Foucher has been regarded as a confirmation of this hypothesis; see in particular, Garber (2009: 268–279).

14 Adams (1994: 257, italics in the original).

A series of marginal annotations successively added to the main text sees Leibniz explain the notion of existence in this way: «that is, an Existent thing is what can be sensed or perceived distinctly, where “distinctly” means by using distinct concepts, just as Being (*Ens*) is what can be distinctly conceived» (A VI 2: 487n).

As I mentioned above, the distinction – according to Leibniz – between conceivability (or imaginability) and perceivability, as well as that between confused and distinct perceivability, is meant to provide a framework for discussing the question of how to distinguish reality from imagination (or fiction), or, to use Leibniz’s later terminology, real phenomena from imaginary ones.

A further confirmation comes from the following text, which sounds like a programmatic set of formulas by the young Leibniz:

Whatever is sensed exists. Indemonstrable.

Whatever exists is sensed. To be demonstrated.

Better said: not whatever is sensed exists, but whatever is clearly and distinctly sensed.

(ca, 1671, A VI 2: 282)

Leibniz proposes a sort of equivalence, one that could be rendered as “something exists if and only if it can be clearly and distinctly perceived”. What Leibniz now goes on to say is that the first part of the equivalence, the one proceeding from “perception” to “existence”, needs no proof because it is immediately evident – it is the same as premise (2) in the argument above, since I assume that “to be true” and “to exist” can be read interchangeably at this stage¹⁵. According to Leibniz, indeed, all that an immediate perception can offer us is the fact that we can be certain of what we are perceiving at the very same moment we are perceiving it; nothing more, nothing less.

At the level of immediate perception, this means that there are only two claims that I can never call into question: (a) my own existence as a thinking or perceiving being, and (b) the existence of what I perceive, i.e., the *phenomena* of my perception, but only *qua* phenomena, that is *qua* objective (intentional) contents of my representation.

In a famous text from the 1680s, Leibniz will express his thoughts on this point in the clearest manner:

In the first place, I judge without proof, from a simple perception or experience, that those things exist of which I am conscious within me. These are, first, *myself* who am thinking of a variety of things and, then, the varied *phenomena* or appearances which exist in my mind. Since both of these namely are perceived immediately by the mind without the intervention of anything else, they can be

15 «True is whatever is clearly and distinctly sensible [*later addition*: what can be perceived]» (A VI 2: 493). Assuming that truth is correspondence with what exists, and what exists is what can be (distinctly) perceived, this way of explaining truth seems to be the most natural; see also Leibniz’s definition of truth in the *Preface to Nizolius*, A VI 2: 409/L 121.

accepted without question, and it is exactly as certain that there exists in my mind the appearance of the golden mountain or of a centaur when I dream of these, as it is that I who am dreaming exist, for both are included in the one fact that it is certain that a centaur appears to me¹⁶.

In the texts from 1671–72 the same idea is expressed, albeit in an incipient way and with many terminological oscillations, even though it is clear enough that, in discussing the polarity between *cogitare* and *sentire*, Leibniz thinks of *cogitatio* as something which shows the unity of the mind, and of *sentio* as that which stands for the plurality of states that the mind represents to itself¹⁷.

In his criticism of Descartes in the years that followed, Leibniz will often repeat that the *cogito ergo sum* is not the only first principle of perception (or the first truth of fact), since it is actually composed of two distinct but interrelated principles, which say, respectively: «I, who perceive, exist», and «There are various things which are perceived by me», explaining that «two things above all occur to someone experiencing, that the perceptions are various, and that it is one and the same person who is perceiving» (A VI 4: 1395/LoC 239)¹⁸.

All in all, this is just Cartesian certainty, as Descartes himself presented it in the second *Meditation*: «[...] I am now seeing light, hearing a noise, feeling heat. But I am asleep, so all this is false. Yet it certainly *seems* to me to hear and to be warmed. This cannot be false; what is called “having a sensory perception” is strictly just this, and in this restricted sense of the term is simply thinking» (AT VII: 29/CSM II: 19).¹⁹ Thus, despite what Leibniz explicitly says in the many

16 *De Modo Distinguendi Phaenomena Realia ab Imaginariis*, ca. 1683-5, A VI 4: 1500/L 153.

17 Cf. A VI 2: 282–283, especially 283: «When I think, I immediately think of myself and of something else. Or: when I think, I immediately feel. Indeed, when I think, I immediately think many things, and one among many. Whatever it is that I think, whatever it is that I feel, it is certain that I feel myself and something else – that is, diversity (*Cum cogito statim me et aliud cogito. Vel: cum cogito statim sentio. Imo cum cogito statim multa cogito, et unum in multis. Quicquid sit illud cogito, quicquid illud sentio: certum est me sentire me et aliud, seu diversitatem*)»; cf. the commentary on this passage in Piro (1990: 127–128). For a later statement (ca. 1711), see LH IV, 8, Bl. 96v: «There are certain first truths which can neither be proved nor should be proved; in the realm of sense, these are the perceptions themselves – for at least it is true that we feel or perceive (*sunt quaedam primae veritates quae probari nec possunt nec debent; tales in sensibilibus sunt ipsae perceptiones, saltem enim nos sentire, aut percipere verum est*)».

18 The same criticism already occurred in Leibniz's letter to Foucher, 1675, A II 1²: 390, and will be repeated in Leibniz's later notes to Descartes' *Principia Philosophiae*, ad art. 7, GP IV: 357. Cf. Belaval (1960: 203 and 233–234); Lærke (2019).

19 Cf. AT VII: 160 (CSM II: 113). See also Descartes to Renier for Pollot, May 1638, AT II: 36. See also: «But if he wants to prove his existence from the feeling or the belief he has that he is breathing, so that he judges that even if the opinion were untrue he could not have it if he did not exist, then his proof is sound. For in such a case the thought of breathing is present to our mind before the thought of our existing, and we cannot doubt that we have it while we have it. To say “I am breathing, therefore I exist”, in this sense, is simply to say “I am thinking, therefore I exist”» (AT II: 37–38/DPC 98).

passages in which he reproaches the shortcomings of the Cartesian *cogito*, this part of his theory is nothing but a faithful translation of what Descartes had already said into the language of Leibnizian phenomenalism.

The other side of the equivalence, however, the one stating that “if something exists, it can be (clearly and distinctly) perceived”, is one that requires a demonstration. In the passage in which it occurs, however, Leibniz gives us no clue about how it could be demonstrated.

This side of the equivalence is much more difficult to defend, at least *prima facie*, because it seems to challenge the strength of Leibniz’s commitment to phenomenalism. How can we be entitled to say that the limits of what exists are the same things as the limits of our distinct perceivability? In what way could we make sense of this claim? Interestingly, Leibniz’s first step towards the idea of a plurality of worlds will move from a discussion precisely of this topic in his Paris notes (see Chapter 7 below).

In the long run, his strategy will proceed as follows. Instead of providing a direct proof of the claim that “if something exists, it can be (clearly and distinctly) perceived”, he will resort to proving the truth of its contrapositive, that is “if something cannot be (clearly and distinctly) perceived, it does not exist”. As I will show in what follows, indeed, the thesis that all existing things are reciprocally connected will play a fundamental role in Leibniz’s attempt to demonstrate such a claim.

In the years 1670–72, Leibniz seems to be content to stick with the claim that the existence of something which is not perceived has not to be presumed, and with the pragmatic maxim that what is not presumed, can be practically regarded as nothing at all, at least until the contrary will be proved («*Quicquid non praesumitur, in praxi habendum est pro nullo, antequam probetur*»)²⁰. This notion of presumption is a sort of pragmatic principle, though it gains its strength by relying on something close to the “principle of verification”; the basic idea, roughly speaking, is that our belief that *p* cannot be directly proved (so that we could never be able to ascribe to *p* an absolute certainty), but the probability of *p*’s being true increases as much as it appears not to be at variance or in contradiction with an always increasing set of other assumptions or beliefs. In this way, even if we cannot consider it as absolutely certain, we can consider it as morally certain, which, from a practical point of view, amounts to the same thing²¹.

20 *Preface to Nizolius*, A VI 2: 451. This is what Leibniz calls the principle of moral certainty.

21 Cf. Hobbes, *Elements of Law*, I, vi, 5: «A proposition is said to be supposed, when being not evident, it is nevertheless admitted for a time, to the end, that, joining to it other propositions, we may conclude something; and to proceed from conclusion to conclusion, for a trial whether the same will lead us into any absurd or impossible conclusion; which if it do, then we know such supposition to have been false» (EW IV: 29). On the history of the notion of moral certainty, see Franklin (2001).

This principle is at work in those texts where Leibniz is testing the view that the regularity of sensations makes them truthful (or, at least, highly probable), in contrast with the disordered way in which the sensations occur when we are dreaming. This quote, for instance, comes from a text probably drafted between 1669 and 1670:

We have this criterion for distinguishing the experience of dreaming from that of being awake – we are certain of being awake only when we remember why (*qua ratione*) we have to come to our present position and condition and see the fitting connection of the things which are appearing to us, to each other, and to those that preceded. In dreams we do not grasp this connection when it is present; nor are we surprised when it is absent²².

To summarize: the starting point for Leibniz's analysis is just the fact that we have such and such perceptions. Since we are not able to go beyond the phenomena to discover if they are deceptive or not, or if there is something "out there" or not, the only thing we can do is to look for an internal feature that can allow us to say if and when our perceptions must be taken as trustworthy (at least in a moral sense). *Regularity*, then, seems to be a good candidate for this work, and for several reasons²³.

It meets our subjective exigencies of intelligibility, allowing us to find reasons (or, better still, explanations) that connect our present perceptions with those of the past and to make reliable predictions about those of the future. In addition, regularity of a series of sensations or perceptions seems to be connected also with the intersubjective character we would like to ascribe to what we are really experiencing, in sharp contrast with the typically private character of what we experience when dreaming. This, I think, is the genuine sense of what Leibniz means when claiming that existence has to be explained in terms of distinct perceivability.

At this point, the "dream argument" discussed in the passages analysed above provides us with another argument (an epistemological one, this time) to reject

22 *De Vi Persuadendi. De Somnio et Vigilia*, 1669–1670, A VI 2: 276/L 114. The regularity of dreams, however, is mentioned by Leibniz as one of the premises for a demonstration of the immortality of the soul in the *Demonstrationum Catholicarum Conspectus*, A VI 1: 495. Leibniz's insistence here, however, is on the fact that some harmonizing activity of the mind can be detected also when the mind itself is not conscious of its own action (typically, when we are asleep).

23 In a Parisian text, Leibniz writes: «On a due consideration, only this is certain: that we sense, and that we sense in a consistent way, and that some rule is observed by us in our sensing» (A VI 3: 511/DSR 63). The notion of rule is not a generic one, however, since Leibniz himself had already provided the following definition: «A *rule* is an instrument of action, determining the form of the action and the perpetual and successive application of the agent to the parts of the instrument. A pair of compasses is an instrument of action that determines the form of the action, but without the required successive application to the parts of the compasses. So a thread in a labyrinth, a footpath on a plain is a rule of action» (A VI 3: 483/DSR 39). For other passages concerning the notion of "rule", see A VI 2: 498, and Blank (2005: 159–174).

the idea that existence can be regarded as a property of individuals. In order to clarify this point, consider the following quote from a twenty-first century source:

There is a further reason someone might have for doubting the predicate view [the view that existence is a property of individuals], which is epistemological in character: namely, that existence is not a *perceptible* property of objects. If we hold to the empiricist principle that the only properties of objects are perceptible properties, at least in principle, then we get the result that existence isn't a property [...]. Why is existence not a perceptible feature of objects? Because regardless of whether or not an object exists it will still be present the same sensory appearance: hallucinated pink rats look an awful lot like existent pink rats. [...] Being blue, say, makes a difference to how something looks, so that blue rats look quite unlike pink ones: but existing makes no qualitative difference –there is no *impression* of existence (as Hume in effect said). That is really why scepticism about the external world is possible: you can never build existence into the appearances, so it must always be inferred or assumed. If existence were like a colour, you could know that the external world exists just by inspecting your sense-data: but that is exactly what existence does not allow. (McGinn 2000: 44–45)

As the author acknowledges, the argument can be rejected, stating that its premises are true but that the conclusion does not follow, unless one does accept the “empiricist principles” that the only properties of objects are the perceptible ones. The rejection of such a principle will be clearly stated by Leibniz in his late texts²⁴. I think that something similar occurred in Leibniz's mind during his reflections on dreams in the Paris period, where he acknowledged that the radicalization of the dream argument (*viz.*, the idea that a dream could be as coherent and well-connected as reality is supposed to be) would have led him to a relativization of actual existence; a conclusion he eventually resisted.

One may also ask how to reconcile Leibniz's phenomenalist conclusion with the view that the existence of things is inferred by reason and not perceived by the senses? Well, the point is that the existence of something, which perhaps is imperceptible to us because of the deficiency of our sense organs can and should be inferred by us, but only moving from something which has already been given to our sensibility (to the effect that the conditional and hypothetical structure of reasoning is maintained, and no existence can be demonstrated moving by pure reason itself). As Leibniz writes in the Paris notes:

24 Cf. *On What is Independent of Sense and Matter*, 1702: «*Being* itself and the *truth* are not known wholly through the senses. For it would not be impossible for a creature to have a long and orderly dreams resembling our *life*, such that everything it believed it perceived by the senses was nothing but mere *appearances*. There must therefore be something beyond the senses which distinguishes the true from the apparent. But the truth of demonstrative sciences is exempt from these doubts, and must even serve to judge the truth of sensible things» (GP VI 489/AG 188).

We appear to prove the existence of things in so far as they follow from our sensations as either a necessary or a probable consequence. We assume, then, both that our sensations exist and that what follows from them exists. Thus it is that existence follows from sensation. We can say that those things which are sensed as a consequence are also sensed. But it is better to say that what is sensed by us is the palace which we dream or see. (A VI 3: 464/DSR 9)

As the last line of the quotation makes clear, Leibniz is aware of the ambiguity of the term “sensation”, which could be taken either in a broad sense, covering also what is not directly perceived by us but whose existence is only inferred by us moving from something originally given to the senses (and, in this way, one could say that we sense also what follows from what we have sensed), or in a narrow sense, whereby sensation refers only to what is immediately perceived by us, be it something existing in the real world or something merely imagined (the palace that we see in front of us vs. the palace that we imagine we are seeing when dreaming). Ultimately, Leibniz concludes that only the latter should be called “sensation” in a proper sense (even though, as I have said many times, Leibniz’s terminology is not always constant).

In the passage above, Leibniz does not specify the way in which one could trace back the existence of what is not directly perceived to what is actually given to us, or, alternatively, how one could infer from the latter the existence of the former, but it seems clear enough that some concept of causality is required here – namely, the possibility of establishing that what appears to us is the effect of something that does not appear to us but works as the cause of the former, and so on (a sort of causal chain based on perceptions)²⁵.

The connection between existence and causality has always been regarded as somehow fundamental, to the extent that, given the difficulties concerned with the explanation of existence (especially when “explanation” is conceived in terms of “explaining away”), the last resort seems to be that of providing a characterization of existence (or a gloss thereof) by saying that “to be” is the same as “to have causal powers”²⁶.

A somewhat similar view, after all, had been presented by Leibniz himself in the final part of his *Preface to Nizolius*, when he notes that certain general propositions, whose necessity can neither be proved *a priori*, nor rest on induction, like “every fire burns”, can be proved only with the addition of some universal propositions «which do not depend on induction but on a universal idea or

25 On the analogy between this position and Kant’s second postulate of empirical thought, see Di Bella (2016). For Kant, “actuality” (*Wirklichkeit*) requires «perception, thus sensation of which one is conscious – not immediate perception of the object itself the existence of which is to be cognized, but still its connection with some actual perception in accordance with the analogies of experience [i.e., substance, cause, and reciprocal interaction]» (*Critique of Pure Reason*, A 225/B 272; GW 325).

26 Cf. Berto (2012a).

definition of terms», like the principle that if the cause is similar, the effect will be similar as well (A VI 2: 431/L 129).

5.4. Between Pragmatism and Phenomenalism: The Problem of the External World

Moving from something like the Cartesian *cogito* and its immediate internal contents, one is immediately led to face two relevant problems concerning the reality of the external world: how to prove the existence of material bodies and that of other minds.

The first problem, in particular, is at the centre of Leibniz's attention in many passages from the Paris notes as well as from the drafts connected to the project of the *Elementa de mente*²⁷. In a sense, it seems correct to say that, in these texts, Leibniz provides us with something like a reductionist analysis of bodies in terms of perceptions (or phenomena) of our minds.

Such a programme is explicitly stated in the following passage: «Existence is stated equivocally of bodies and of our mind. We sense or perceive that we exist; when we say that bodies exist, we mean that there exist certain consistent sensations, having a particular constant cause» (15 April 1676, A VI 3: 512/DSR 67).

Interestingly, this passage openly appeals for an equivocal reading of existence. A contemporary reader would find relevant analogies with Ryle's notorious diagnosis of the "category mistake" occurring in propositions like "there exist bodies and minds", as a way of dissipating the contrast between mind and matter (Cartesian dualism). The analogy stops there, however, because Leibniz

²⁷ Leibniz does not seem, however, to pay much attention to the problem of our knowledge of other minds. Most of the time, indeed, Leibniz indiscriminately uses both the first-person singular and the first-person plural (shifting from one to the other) when discussing minds. Sometimes, he seems to realize that there is a gap in his generalization from the private perspective of a single mind to the existence of a plurality of minds, but the answer he provides is somewhat obscure. I am thinking of the argument he produces at the end of *De Modo Distinguendi*, A VI 4: 1503/L 365. The same argument had already been proposed at A VI 4: 1396/LoC 241, and is clearly based on the application of the principle of sufficient reason or, better, on some kind of no-reason argument. A significant variation on the theme can be found in a text dated to around 1679: «There is indeed, as an *a posteriori* sign of real being, the interconnection of all appearances with one another, which is lacking in dreams; yet this sign is not demonstrative. Therefore, the reality of the objects which affect our senses can be known in no other way than *a priori*, by considering that we cannot be alone in the world, and that the same reason holds for other human beings who appear to us as holds for ourselves, and that they have an equal right to doubt about us. And although it may seem possible in itself that all those things are phantasms, it is nevertheless not possible in the world, when the universal order of things is taken into account (*Est quidem signum Entis Realis a posteriori connexio omnium apparentiarum inter se, quae deest somniis; non tamen id signum demonstrativum. Itaque non alio modo sciri potest realitas obsectorum quae sensus nostros afficiunt quam a priori, considerando nos non posse esse solos in Mundo, et eandem rationem pro aliis hominibus nobis apparentibus esse, quam pro nobis et illis par jus esse de nobis dubitandi; et licet possibile videatur in se omnia illa esse Phantasmata, non tamen est possibile in Mundo considerata ratione rerum universalis*)» (A VI 4: 307).

would never subscribe to anything like Ryle's behaviouristic approach to the problem of the mind.

In the writings of the Mainz period, we find, to the contrary, at least one attempt to reduce talking about bodies to talking more fundamentally about the perceptions that a mind can ascribe to itself (from a first-person point of view):

Non-analysable words like: *that which is, I*, and, in sum, all the names in the nominative case or the verbs in the indicative mode, present tense and first person singular. In this way, instead of this proposition *a body is sensed*, this other proposition can be substituted: *a body is that which I sense*. It could be even further analysed, in this way: *I sense, I am sensing*. However, in this way it would not work, since *that which (id quod)* in this place is in the accusative case, and *I am (sum)* cannot be taken with the accusative case, nor can the participle do it. Therefore, the resolution should proceed in this way: *A body is something of which I am sentient*. I think that all the other oblique cases can ultimately be resolved with the genitive case, i.e., with a conjunction of attribute and subject. Action, indeed, is an attribute which is common to two subjects, while change consists in different attributes of the common subject. (A VI 2: 283)

This passage contains many ideas that will become prominent in the mature Leibniz's logico-ontological analysis: the reduction of the oblique terms to the non-oblique terms, the idea of using linguistic analysis to treat ontological questions (like the analysis of change), the reality of accidents²⁸.

What especially comes to the fore, however, is the attempt to employ linguistic analysis to provide a reduction of talking about bodies to talking about perceptions of our minds (or, better still, of *my* mind, since Leibniz puts his emphasis on the role of the first-person point of view). On the other hand, however, this seems to be an isolated passage, the only one in which Leibniz tries to actually provide a reduction of (talking about) bodies to something more fundamental, like perceptions in this case. It is not clear, moreover, how this alleged reduction is supposed to work²⁹. As Adams has suggested, there is

28 Since his early years, Leibniz seems to be interested in what the tradition called inferences *ab obliquo ad rectum* and vice versa; cf. *Demonstratio Propositionum Primarum*, A VI 2: 486, where the principle is that «Every oblique term [i.e., every term which is not in the nominative case] must be resolved into a rect one [in the nominative case] plus a relative». This strategy seems to be connected with the topic of the abstract/concrete distinction and the style of paraphrase modelled on Raue's analysis of the copula, which Leibniz had already developed in his *Defensio Trinitatis*; cf. A VI 1: 520ff. On oblique terms in general, see Mugnai (2016).

29 In a passage from a short draft, the dating of which is unclear, Leibniz observes: «A perception becomes distinct in this way, insofar as we attribute something similar to us to other things, for we know we are the subject of various attributes, so in a similar way we consider objects as if they were certain substances or things» (*De Distincta Perceptione*, A VI 4: 58). A passage like this might suggest something like Leibniz's mature monadological view that ultimately genuine substances are minds whose attributes are perceptions. It clearly shows what has been called Leibniz's *egologic* access to the notion of substance; cf. a passage written after

no serious attempt in Leibniz to reduce the physical properties of bodies to the (psychological) properties of perceptions (Adams 1994: 223).

Concerns have been raised over the compatibility of these texts with others in which Leibniz seems to be convincingly committed to a conception of bodies as really extended and impenetrable, one perfectly in keeping with the views of the mechanical philosophy. Regarding the passage in which Leibniz attempts to paraphrase “A body is sensed” in the terms “A body is something of which I am sentient”, Daniel Garber has written that Leibniz was flirting here with a sort of Berkeleyan phenomenalism, according to which «bodies exist insofar as they are sensed by minds, but the kinds of minds at issue here are the conscious minds or rational creatures»³⁰.

At other times, Leibniz seems to suggest that the perceptions required for the existence of bodies should be those of the divine rather than the human mind. As evidence of this approach, Garber quotes the following passage:

Since to be a body is to move, it must be asked what it is to move. If it is to change place, then what is place? Isn't this determined by reference to bodies [...] So what in the end are body and motion really, if we are to avoid this circle? What else but being sensed by some mind? [...] *For the existence of bodies, it is certain that some mind immune from body is required, different from all the others we sense.* For it is clear that these minds we sense, such as anyone experiences in himself, confer nothing towards the existence of things. For it is known from experience that everything is not sensed any the less by others because I am absent, and the same is true of every individual. [...] On the other hand, it is clear that a mind that is free from body, i.e., does not need a body in order to exist, must exist per se. (A VI 3: 100–101/LoC 17).

In a sense, Leibniz in the passages above does not say much more than what he will repeat many years later, when he writes that our mind produces phenomena, while the divine mind produces things³¹. The role of the divine mind is important to understand what Leibniz is thinking when he writes (in a passage cited above) that «when we say that bodies exist, we mean that there exist certain consistent sensations, having a particular constant cause», as well as the fact that «the

October 1702: «But that we are not substances is contrary to experience, since in truth we have no knowledge of substance except from the intimate experience of our own self, when we perceive the *ego*, and by that example we attribute the name of substance to God himself and to other monads (*Sed nos non esse substantias experientiae contrarium est, cum revera nullam substantiae [notitiam] habeamus, nisi ex intima nostri ipsius experientia, cum percipimus τὸ Ἐγώ, eoque exemplo ipsi deo et aliis Monadibus substantiae appellationem tribuamus*)» (*De Vi Derivativa et Primitiva*, LH I, 20, Bl. 215v).

30 Garber (2009: 26). For the parallel with Berkeley, see Adams (1994: 235–240), and Wilson (1987).

31 «*Nostra Mens phaenomenon facit, divina Rems*», around 1710, C 528. For a new edition of this text (LH IV, 8, Bl. 56–57), see Jenschke (2015); see also the passage on the *phaenomena Dei* in a text for Des Bosses (1712), GP II 438 (discussed below, Chapter 7).

coherence of sensations must itself spring from some cause». Thus, the existence of God (as the only mind «immune from body») is the ultimate guarantee of the existence of bodies, but not of the existence of bodies merely as they appear to us; rather, God is the guarantor of the coherence or regularity of our perceptions.

What the existence of God is the cause of, in other words, is only the coherence among the sensations of one's mind (the agreement between one's past, present, and future sensations) as well as the coherence between the sensations of one's mind and those of all the other (finite) minds. This point is clearly expressed in the 1675 letter to Foucher:

I return to those truths, from among those asserting that there is something outside us, which are first with respect to ourselves, namely, that we think and that there is a great variety in our thoughts. Now, this variety cannot come from that which thinks, since a single thing by itself cannot be the cause of the changes in itself. For everything would remain in the state in which it is, if there is nothing that changes it; and since it did not determine itself to have these changes rather than others, one cannot begin to attribute any variety to it without saying something which, we must admit, has no reason – which is absurd. [...] Therefore, there is some cause outside of us for the variety of our thoughts. And since we conceive that there are subordinate causes for this variety, causes which themselves still need causes, we have established particular beings or substances certain of whose actions we recognize, that is, things from whose changes we conceive certain changes in us to follow. And we quickly proceed to construct what we call matter and body. (A II 1²: 390/AG 3)

Here the existence of «some cause outside of us for the variety of our thoughts» is inferred by relying on the principle of sufficient reason (PSR). However, Leibniz's particular way of explaining why it would be without reason (and, thus, absurd) that a variety of thoughts (appearances) occur in our minds without some external cause producing it is a very curious one: the application of something like the law of inertia to the particular case of the series of thoughts of a certain mind³².

Nevertheless, he will always hold that the variety of our thoughts (or of the appearances in our minds) require an external cause as its reason. The same train of thought, after all, will lead to the idea, clearly explained in the *Discourse on Metaphysics*, according to which, properly speaking, «God alone [...] is the cause of this correspondence of their [our minds'] phenomena and makes that which is particular to one of them public to all of them» (A VI 4: 1550–1551/AG 47)³³.

32 Cf. the following passage from a letter to De Volder dated 1699: «I admit that each and every thing remains in its state until there is a reason for change. This is a principle of metaphysical necessity» (A II 3: 546–547 / LDV 73–75).

33 Cf. a text probably written around 1696: «and there is, as we have shown elsewhere, a certain intimate and evidently marvellous connection of all substances among themselves, made by their common dependence on the perfect substance (*est quaedam ut alibi ostendemus, intima et plane*

In the account Leibniz provides in his letter to Foucher as well as in many later texts, what is particularly interesting, however, is a sort of “pragmatic twist”, which makes Leibniz conclude that the sceptical doubt about the external world is at the same time theoretically insoluble and practically harmless. As he writes to Foucher, «all our experiences assure us only of two things, namely, that there is a connection among our appearances which provides us the means to predict future appearances with success, and that this connection must have a constant cause». From this, however, «it does not strictly follow [...] that matter or bodies exist, but only that there is something that presents well-sequenced appearances to us» (A II 1²: 390/ AG 3–4).

This means that, even though it is true that «the more we see some connection in what happens to us, the more we are confirmed in the opinion we have about the reality of our appearances», what we can conclude, from the theoretical point of view, is only that the existence of bodies is highly probable, something which gives us “moral certainty”, but does not serve to dispel the possibility that we are constantly deceived in our everyday experience.

At this point, one could think that the maximum of coherence between our appearances will automatically coincide with the existence of external objects themselves (or, better still, the maximum of coherence will automatically turn into a perfect correspondence with the objects themselves). But this would be a mistake: first, indeed, the process is clearly an infinite one, and, thus, the limit is something imaginary, a *focus imaginarius* or an “idea of reason” in the Kantian sense. Furthermore, and more importantly, we can also formulate the hypothesis that a system of appearance that we use to call “dream” be even superior to the system of appearances that constitutes our waking experiences as far as order, regularity, and internal connection are concerned.

As Leibniz himself puts it, indeed:

By means of this principle [i.e., phenomena that agree with rest are held to be *true*] we distinguish dreams from the things that happen when we are awake. For if some dream is perfectly coherent with the state of life preceding and following it, or if it lasts for a long time without the usual incongruity of dreams, no one could suspect himself of dreaming. And if some Platonist were to say that the whole of his present life is a well-cohering dream, and that his soul will awaken at death; perhaps he could not be refuted *a priori* without knowing the reason for a universe which underwent no interlude of this sort. (A VI 4: 1396/LoC 241).

The last line is particularly interesting: the only way to attain certainty that our phenomena are real (that there is something corresponding to them “out there”) would involve a perfect knowledge of the reason of the universe; the

mirabilis connexio omnium inter se substantiarum, quam facit communis dependentia a substantia perfecta»
(LH XXXV, 7, 10, Bl. 5 v., ed. in Arthur–Ottaviani 2025: 151–153); cf. Rutherford (2021).

agreement among our perception, as Leibniz writes to Foucher, will engender only moral certainty in us «until somebody discovers the *a priori* origin of the world we see and pursues the question as to why things are the way they appear back to the ground of essence» (A II 1²: 391/AG 4).

If, from the theoretical point of view, the question concerning the existence of the external world turns out ultimately to be an insoluble one, it becomes, however – for that very same reason – absolutely harmless from the practical point of view: «by no argument can it be demonstrated absolutely that bodies exist, nor is there anything to prevent certain well-ordered dreams from being the objects of our mind», but this point is no importance, says Leibniz, «so far as practice is concerned (*quoad usum*)», since we will still judge these phenomena as true, or equivalent to truth, as far as their agreement with each other will continue to hold (A VI 4: 1502/L 364).

A strong “pragmatist” strand permeates Leibniz’s argument, here as well as elsewhere³⁴. From the practical point of view, indeed, we can consider the distinction between regular phenomena and reality as null, or, conversely, we can take regular phenomena as true or equivalent to truth. Thus, against Descartes’ sceptical challenge (*le malin génie*), Leibniz can reply that a pragmatic solution is more than enough to dispel the Cartesian doubt about our knowledge of the external world.

The kind of agreement among perceptions that Leibniz regards as the only reliable criterion for distinguishing reality from fiction, holds in the same way in the case of the perceptions internal to each individual mind as well as in the case of the perceptions belonging to two (or more) different minds. In both cases, this kind of agreement among perceptions is nothing but a system of relations, or, better still, a system of many systems of relations (in the case of a plurality of minds, of course), something that Leibniz sometimes calls “harmony” (see A VI 4: 1360). While in the case of the perceptions internal to each single mind the order of perceptions is spelled out, however, mostly in temporal terms (the connections that my present perceptions have with the past ones, and the anticipations of the future ones), in the case of the agreement among the perceptions of two (or more) minds, the more natural interpretation is found in a system of spatial connections³⁵.

34 Cf. A VI 4: 1398: «And so the objections the Sceptics make against observations are inane. Certainly, they may doubt the truth of things, and if it pleases them to call the things that occur to us dreams, it suffices for these dreams to be in agreement with each other, and to obey certain laws, and accordingly to leave room for human prudence and predictions. And granting this, it is only a question of names. For apparitions of this kind we call *true*, and I do not see how they could be either rendered or chosen truer» (LoC 243–245). Hence, it clearly follows that, if from the theoretical point of view, coherence among perceptions is only a proxy for the correspondence with things in themselves, from the practical or pragmatic point of view the two things can be taken as equivalent. On Leibniz’s pragmatic strand, see Adams (2017) and (2021: 119–123); see also the seminal paper by Hochstetter (1966).

35 On this point, see especially Futch (2008); Arthur (2021, Ch. 2).

Concerning space, one can see how Leibniz's reflections clearly move from the distinction between dreams and reality:

It is not necessary that a dream differs from waking experience by some intrinsic reality, but only that they differ in form or in the order of the sensations. Therefore there is no reason why we should ask whether certain bodies exist outside me, or whether space exists, and other things of this sort; for we do not explain adequately the terms that are involved here. Unless, that is, we say that we call a "body" whatever is perceived in a consistent way, and say that "space" is that which brings it about that several perceptions cohere with each other at the same time. (A VI 3: 511/DSR 63–65)³⁶

I think this passage could be very useful to delineate the nature and the limits of Leibniz's early phenomenism, also in order to dispel the suggestion that something like Berkeleyan phenomenism is the view Leibniz was entertaining in these texts. Leibniz says that there is no reason to ask questions concerning the existence of bodies and space outside us «for we do not adequately explain the terms that are involved here»³⁷.

The switch from what we could, roughly speaking, call a realistic account to a phenomenist characterization of body as the object of coherent perceptions, then, seems to be just a consequence of the fact that, for us, it is impossible to distinguish reality from dreams «by some intrinsic reality» (which I take to refer to some qualitative feature) and, therefore, our knowledge of bodies is not a perfectly adequate one.

All this makes it clear that the phenomenist turn has to be regarded as a sort of second-best option, whereas, as I have remarked above, it is a perfectly reliable one from the practical point of view. I would say it is best to think of the young Leibniz as a "provisional phenomenist" (by analogy with what the mature Leibniz will say about his commitment to nominalism), leaving aside the question of whether such a commitment to phenomenism must necessarily lead him to embrace an idealistic metaphysics or not³⁸.

36 On Leibniz's meditations on dreams and reality, the most insightful analysis has been provided by Castañeda (1978).

37 See again A VI 4: 307: «So far, however, I cannot yet demonstrate that bodies are real beings, so much so that I would dare to assert this about my own body. But these things depend on the true concept of body. (*Illud tamen nondum demonstrare possum, quod Corpora sint Entia realia; adeo ut de meo quidem id asserere ausim. Sed haec pendet a vero corporis conceptu*)».

38 In a letter to Leibniz of November 1715, Johann C. Biel mentioned Arthur Collier's book, *Clavis Universalis: or, A New Inquiry after Truth. Being a Demonstration of the Non-Existence, or Impossibility, of an External World* (1713), inspired by the philosophy of Berkeley. In his reply, Leibniz noted: «I had not yet heard anything about Collier's book opposing the existence of external things; most people will judge it worth a laugh, like Berkeley's. It is true that bodies are not substances, but aggregates, but they are not for that reason non-beings. Malebranche, who recently passed away, inculcated these marvellous thoughts in those men (*De Collierii libro contra existentiam rerum extarnarum nondum quicquam audiveram, plerique risu dignum judicabunt, ut*

As the text quoted above clearly shows, the reality of bodies outside us is something we have to explain by recourse to a phenomenalist approach only because «we do not explain adequately the terms that are involved here (*horum enim terminus non satis explicamus*)», which means (if I am reading Leibniz correctly) that our notions of body and space have to be characterized in epistemological more than ontological terms³⁹. As he writes in the same Paris text: «Since what we can judge about the existence of material things is no more than the consistency of our senses, one has a sufficient basis for judging that we can ascribe nothing to matter apart from being sensed in accordance with some certain laws, whose reason (I admit) remains to be sought» (A VI 3: 508/DSR 59).

The same conclusion will be reached in a later, still unpublished text, tentatively dated to around the very beginning of the 1690s. There Leibniz faces the aporia concerning the fact that, in the notion of corporeal substance there are not just relational notions but also something absolute (i.e., non-relational); «for the very same fact that it is something absolute», however, «it cannot be explained by us». Leibniz therefore, goes on to claim that:

[I]nstead of this “something”, in order to recognize bodies and to conceive a difference among them, we use indistinct qualities; and, even though we cannot explain the way in which they appear to us, for they involve an expression of infinite things, and even of the whole universe, however, it is sufficient that we are able to notice attributes that may be thought in a distinct way and which are connected with these confused ideas by means of a certain constant rule (*ratione*), in order that, thence, we are able to come to a certain set of rules and reasons and predictions [which are useful] in practice⁴⁰.

Berkeleyi. Verum est corpora non esse substantias, sed aggregata, sed non ideo sunt non-Entia. Malebranchius qui nuper obiit has miras cogitationes istis hominibus injecit» (LBr 66, Bl. 15–16, italics mine). The text of this letter was originally published by N. Barkey, *Symbolae litterariae Haganae*, vol. 2, Hagae-Comitum, Apud I. H. Munnikhuizen & C. Plaat, 1779, 489. Reference to Malebranche is extremely interesting, because it shows that Leibniz had in mind the position Malebranche expressed in the sixth Elucidation to *The Search after Truth* (Malebranche 1997: 568–576). On Leibniz’s remarks on Berkeley (Leibniz Marg. 52), see Robinet (1983).

39 The best reading, in my opinion, is that which Castañeda (1978: 100) labels “Epistemological interpretation”, whereby «the criterion we have for claiming or postulating the existence of a certain object is the compliance of the object’s appearances to minds with definite laws»; such a reading has to be distinguished from both the “reductive phenomenistic interpretations” (according to which Leibniz would actually reduce bodies to set of consistent perceptions) and the “ontological dependence interpretation” (according to which the laws of perceptual appearances are also constitutive laws of objects existing outside the mind). A somewhat similar view is Garber’s “human-mind phenomenalism”, cf. Garber (2009: 278–279).

40 «Est scilicet in substantia corporea non tantum repraesentatio et agendi conatus, haec enim omnia sunt relativa, sed etiam absolutum quiddam, sed quod eo ipso quia absolutum est a nobis explicari non potest. Interim ejus loco ad dignoscenda corpora, et discrimen concipiendum utimur qualitatibus indistinctis; et licet has ut nobis apparent explicare non possimus, implicant enim expressionem infinitorum, et totius adeo universi, sufficit tamen ut notemus distincte cogitabilia attributa, quae his confusis ideis constanti quadam ratione cohaerent, ut inde ad

5.5. Leibniz's Provisional Phenomenalism

Concluding this discussion of Leibniz's early phenomenalism, some clarifications are in order concerning the relationship that this kind of phenomenalism has with Leibniz's mature thesis about the phenomenal nature of bodies. Two remarks are in order here.

The first consists in the observation that Leibniz's earlier and his mature phenomenalism provide answers to two different questions. What I have called "provisional phenomenalism", indeed, is essentially meant to provide an answer to the question of the existence of bodies (scepticism about the external world), whereas Leibniz's later thesis that bodies are phenomena insofar as they are aggregates and not true substances, is essentially meant as a theory to explain the "essence" or the "nature" of bodies (it presupposes the radical mereological thesis that the only genuine substances are those without physical or extended parts)⁴¹. That it is difficult to keep these two questions distinct from each other can, perhaps, be explained by Leibniz's ambiguous usage of the notion of reality⁴² of bodies, where "reality" can be alternatively interpreted as a synonym of "existence" or "essence". I think is also interesting in this case to note that the first problem that comes to Leibniz's mind is that of the existence of bodies "outside us", whereas it will only be later (i.e., only after that he will

regulas quasdam rationesque, et praedictiones in praxi perveniamus» (*Inquisitio in aliquid absolutum, in quod cogitationum objecta resolvi potest*, LH IV, 7C, Bl. 80v); see also Leibniz's interesting remarks on Sextus Empiricus, drafted around 1711: "That things must appear to us differently, according as the variety of the appearance lies either in us or in external causes, does not conflict with the truth of things; for a reason can be given even for these very differences of appearance, so that we can in fact produce and predict many of them – whether by effecting a change in things or by anticipating them. And it is vain to deny that the nature of things is known in this way, for it belongs to the very nature of a thing that, when joined with one set of conditions or another, it produces such and such impressions upon us. It is nevertheless entirely true that certain qualities are not fixed in things themselves but arise from the encounter of the thing with the senses; such is heat, since the same thing often appears warm or cold depending on our own condition. Yet nothing prevents there being in the nature of the thing itself a certain root of the appearance, which produces something in the perceiver according to his state. (*Varia nobis apparere debere prout aut in nobis aut in externis causis apparitionis varietas est, non obstat rerum veritati; cum harum ipsarum apparitionis differentiarum reddi ratio possit, adeo ut plurimas ex illo producere ac praedicere possimus, aut efficientem mutationem in rebus aut previdentes. Et frustra negatur, hinc naturam rerum cognosci, nam id ipsum ad rei naturam pertinet, ut cum aliis atque aliis juncta tales ac tales in nos impressiones efficiat. Verissimum est interim, quasdam qualitates non esse fixas in rebus sed ex ipso rei cum sensibus congressu nasci, et talis est caliditas cum saepe idem pro diverso nostro statu calidum et frigidum appareat, interim esse quandam in rei natura radicem apparitionis nihil prohibet quae efficiat aliquid in sentiente pro ipsius statu*)» (*Specimen Animadversionum in Sextum Empiricum*, LH IV, 8, Bl. 97r).

41 Cf. Di Bella (2017a). That Leibniz's analysis of bodies as aggregates is intended as an answer to the question concerning the *essence* or *nature* of bodies has been clearly pointed out by Rutherford (1990a: 526–527).

42 Cf. Rutherford (1990b: 22–23).

have recovered a metaphysics of real essences) that the problem of the reality (essence/nature) of body will come to the fore.

The second remark focuses on the relationship between substances and phenomena. On this point, I think that Adams' analysis should be followed. He has shown how substances in Leibniz's earlier phenomenalism are «the subjects *to* which the phenomena appear». At this stage, indeed, the idea that phenomena are “phenomena *of* substances” can be accepted only by taking the genitive as a *subjective* one, i.e., as the claim that phenomena are ultimately grounded in the perceptions of mind-like substances. In Leibniz's mature phenomenalism, however, another way of interpreting the phenomena-substances relationship will become prominent, i.e., one according to which phenomena are “phenomena *of* substances” in the *objective* sense of the genitive, i.e., as the claim that bodies are aggregates of substances (or *substantiata*)⁴³.

This later conception is richer than the previous one, of course, but also more complicated, especially as far as concerns the question of whether phenomena-as-aggregates have to be regarded as phenomena in the first sense, i.e., appearances, or not. What is interesting, however, is that the earlier view will never be rejected by Leibniz; rather, it will be employed by him as a kind of last resort solution to the problem of the existence of a world of material objects⁴⁴.

43 Cf. Adams (1994: 240). For the persistence of Leibniz's model of the coherence of perceptions in order to explain the existence of bodies, see, for instance, this passage from a letter to De Volder dated June 1704: «it should be said that there is nothing in things except simple substances and in them perception and appetite. Moreover, matter and motion are not so much substances or things as the phenomena of perceivers, the reality of which is located in the *harmony or perceivers with themselves (at different times) and with other perceivers*» (A II 4: 252/LDV 307, italics mine). Cf. also Leibniz to Des Bosses, 15 February 1712, GP II 435–436; cf. also Fichant (2006).

44 In an unpublished text, probably drafted in 1705, Leibniz writes as follows: «That is, everything is presented to the mind as if it were so; and one monad makes up the deficiency of the other's phenomena. And all the phenomena taken together are reconciled in such a result. Even though these are not substantial things, but only *well founded appearances, or harmonious dreams*, matter, bodies, motions can be explained by means of mere phenomena (*Nempe omnia offerentur mentibus quasi sic esset; et una Monas defectum phaenomenorum alterius supplet. Et omnia phaenomena simul sumta, tali resultado conciliantur. Etsi interim haec substantialia non sint, sed tantum apparentia bene fundata seu somnia harmonica, Materia, corpora, motus explicari possunt per mera phaenomena*)» (LH XXXVII, 5, Bl. 134r, italics mine; in Arthur–Ottaviani 2025: 273fn). Cf. Leibniz to G. B. Tolomei, December 1705, A II 4: 369, and GP III 567n.

PART 2
THE RISE OF POSSIBLE WORLDS

Introduction to Part Two

The main ambition of the second part of this book is to provide a comprehensive reconstruction of the genesis of Leibniz's account of possible worlds. The main focus of this part of the book is represented by Leibniz's texts of the Paris period and his first years in Hanover (especially 1677-79). The turning point of Leibniz's metaphysics, indeed, at least for what concerns his theory of possible worlds and his views on the essence/existence distinction, can be definitively placed at this time.

In my reconstruction, possible worlds will be introduced twice: first in Chapter 6 and then again in Chapter 7. Roughly speaking, indeed, I would say that Leibniz's mature ontology of possible worlds is the combination and the mutual integration of a *teleological* (and also *theological*) and of a *cosmological* account of possible worlds¹. Even though these two aspects will find a (more or less) coherent integration in Leibniz's mature views, still it was necessary to isolate them and to analyse them separately, in order to understand their respective contributions to the final picture.

In Chapter 6, I introduce Leibniz's views on the actual world interpreted as a "series of things" (*series rerum*), as expounded in the *Confessio Philosophi* and the Paris texts *De Summa Rerum*, showing that there is originally only one singular series of things (the actual one), whereas unrealized possibilities are not yet conceived of as gathered together into series (possible worlds). The crucial point here is the contrast between the "compactness" of the actual series of things (especially for what concerns its spatiotemporal and causal unification) and the isolated and scattered nature of merely possible things, which are explicitly equated with mere imaginary entities.

Then, I analyse the *Confessio Philosophi* by pointing out that Leibniz's conception of the "series of things" is closely connected to his strong determinism and his theological vindication of God from the charge of having introduced evil in the world. The young Leibniz did not clearly distinguish between "essential" and "existential" (or, alternatively, between logical and causal) dependence. Applied to the case of the relation between God and the world, this account of causal dependence therefore concludes that only this (and just this) world could have been produced by God. The remainder of Chapter 6 is devoted to showing how Leibniz modified his views in order to avoid the necessitarian precipice.

1 The distinction between the "cosmological" and the "teleological" version of possible worlds is taken from Griffin (2013: 163–164). The cosmological version is based on Rutherford's cosmological interpretation of compossibility, which will be addressed in Chapter 7 below. I agree with Griffin that both the teleological and the cosmological interpretation can be integrated into a more comprehensive picture. On the history of possible worlds before Leibniz, see Schmutz (2005).

In Leibniz's re-evaluation of finalism and final causes, especially for what concerns the way in which he interprets the relation between God and the world, his emphasis on the role of *divine wisdom* in the choice of the world to create (i.e., the choice of the best) goes hand in hand with an emphasis on the contingency of the actual world. And the contingency of the actual world is grounded in the possibility for God to choose between different alternative series of things. In this way, we can see how reference to possible alternative series of things explicitly emerges for the very first time in Leibniz's discussion with Niels Stensen (or Steno) at the end of 1677.

From the ontological point of view, the counterpart of the distinction between God's understanding and his will is the distinction between the domain of *essences* (which are the internal object of God's understanding) and the domain of *existing things* (which are the product of the causal action of God's will). Along these lines, Leibniz modifies his early account, emphasizing the distinction between a relation of essential/logical dependence, on the one hand, and a relation of existential/causal dependence on the other².

Chapter 7 dwells on a cosmological account of possible worlds in the sense in which the label "cosmological" can equally be attached to a realist account of possible worlds, such as that put forward by David Lewis in the twentieth-century. According to this view, possible worlds are not to be interpreted counterfactually (they are not just other ways the world could be/have been), but should be interpreted as other worlds, other universes which exist in the very same sense in which our world exist, even though they are disconnected from each other (there are no cross-world spatiotemporal and causal relations).

The interesting thing is that Leibniz seems to have reached a very similar conclusion in his metaphysical reflections of April 1676, claiming that it is really possible that other worlds exist which are completely disconnected from our own world³. In December of the same year, however, Leibniz penned two texts in which he harshly rejects the idea of a plurality of worlds. The main idea is that one is not allowed to extend the notion of existence to what does not count as part of this "series of things" (in other words, the actual world is the most comprehensive and all-embracing group of existing things).

In order to understand this point, however, another feature of Leibniz's account of the "series of things" has to be taken into consideration: the

2 As I shall say in what follows, however, this distinction is paired with Leibniz's emphasis on the necessity of merely possible causes (merely possible requisites) in order to distinguish merely possible individuals (i.e., individual entities) from the possibility of abstract entities. In this sense, it seems that the very same contrast between essential and existential dependence is reproduced within the domain of what is merely possible.

3 However, Leibniz arrives at this conclusion from an altogether different starting point: not the analysis of modal language (as in Lewis) but his phenomenalist theory of existence, and, especially, his argument concerning the distinction between dreams and reality (which I have already introduced in Chapter 5 above).

interconnection among all things, i.e., the holding of spatiotemporal and causal relations of connection among all the members of this world. Whereas the lack of connection between our world and other individuals (hypothetically existing in other worlds) was one of the main arguments in April 1676 for Leibniz to embrace the *real possibility* of many worlds, by the end of the same year, this lack of connection (especially as far as temporal connection is concerned) will be regarded by him as the dividing line between what truly exists and what is merely possible.

Whatever exists is connected with every other existing thing in one and the same world; if we assume the existence of something that is not temporally connected with us (with anything in the actual world), it would therefore be impossible for anyone to decide whether that things exist at the present instant of time or at an instant prior/posterior to the present one. Leibniz's argument has a twofold nature: one based on something like the principle of verification, the other on his reliance on the universal validity of the principle of bivalence. It cannot be doubted, in any case, that Leibniz's conclusion is based on a sort of (actualist) restriction of existence" to what is part of our world only, thus shifting the position of a plurality of universes from the plan of reality (i.e., actual existence) to that of the ideas in God's understanding (which is also a shift from a cosmological to a counterfactual account of possible worlds).

This restriction is not incompatible with Leibniz's claim that compossibility and connection hold in every possible world. In particular, the claim that connection holds in other worlds can be accommodated by saying that possible individuals in a possible world would be/have been mutually connected, had that world been actualized by God. Some tensions are discernible, however, between Leibniz's restriction of existence to actual things only and his commitment to the reality of *possibilia*. This will be the main object of my discussion of Leibniz's treatment of existence in Part III.

Chapter 6. *Series Rerum*. The Actual World and the Genesis of Leibniz’s Theory of Possible Worlds

In the previous chapters (esp. Chapters 3 and 4 above), I have claimed, among other things, that Leibniz’s early theory of possibility, when compared to his mature views, has to be regarded as reductive in a twofold sense: (1) because it ascribes no ontological status to what is merely possible, and (2) because it does not envisage the idea that the possibles are organized into worlds (or “series”) alternative to the actual world. If I am not mistaken, these two issues are closely connected because the reality of possibles (in the sense of their being divine ideas or the internal objects of God’s understanding) depends on and is grounded in Leibniz’s theory of possible worlds¹.

Since the young Leibniz rejected that there is anything like a plurality of possible worlds, he also regarded non-actualized possibilities as lacking any ontological status, however weak it might be. This is particularly the case for possibles interpreted as possible individuals rather than the possibility of general concepts and species (more on this below).

At the very end of the 1670s, however, Leibniz will explicitly reject both (1) and (2). What is particularly interesting is not so much the result itself as the very process which led Leibniz to elaborate his ontology of possible worlds, a process whose main steps can be traced back to the writings of the Paris period and those of the first years in Hanover (1677–78).

According to my reconstruction of the genesis of Leibniz’s theory of possible worlds, the first step is one in which Leibniz contraposes the idea of the world explicitly conceived of in terms of a “series of things” (*series rerum*) – which contains all and only the actual entities taken together in order to constitute a whole – with that of mere or non-actualized possibilities, which are typically understood, by contrast, as disjoint entities which do not compose any totality at all.

At this stage, Leibniz recognizes one and only one “series of things”: the actual world, spatially, temporally, and causally unified. The actual world is a collection of individuals, where each member of this collection is connected to every other member by means of spatiotemporal and causal relations (what Leibniz sometimes calls “relations of connection”)². This does not hold, how-

1 To this point, commentators have already observed that the main difference between the young and the mature Leibniz on this topic concerns the ontological status of bare possibles: see Lærke (2007); Picon (2014a); Rateau (2019: 69–72 and 94–102). This, however, is only part of the complete picture, as I will argue in the pages that follow.

2 As will be stressed emphasized in greater detail in the chapters that follow, the requirement for a plurality of substances to be compatible or compossible in the same world, is that

ever, in the case of what is merely possible. Things possible in themselves, but never actualized, are not organized into series, and, for this reason, they are said to be “accidentally impossible”. Order, in fact, is what gives unity and organization to the collection of individuals in which our world consists.

6.1. Possibilities Without Possible Worlds in the Paris Notes

At the end of 1675, Leibniz proposes the following distinction between two different notions of “(im)possibility”:

“Impossible” is a two-fold concept: that which does not have essence, and that which does not have existence, i.e., that which neither was, is, nor will be because it is incompatible with God, or, with the existence or reason which brings about that things exist rather than do not exist. One must see if it can be proved that there are essences which lack existence, so that it cannot be said that nothing can be conceived which will not exist at some time in the whole of eternity. All things which are, will be, and have been, constitute a whole. (A VI 3: 463–464/DSR 7)

Leibniz draws a distinction between what is absolutely impossible, like a contradictory notion “which does not have essence” (which I understand in this way: there is no essence corresponding to a contradictory notion), and what is impossible, not essentially, but only from an existential point of view. The latter kind of impossibility is introduced in terms of something’s being incompatible with «the existence or reason which brings it about that things exist rather than do not exist», i.e., the principle of sufficient reason, or, perhaps, the principle of the best.

Leibniz adds a remark in passing about the ontological status of non-actualized possibilities, asking whether a demonstration can be produced to show «that there are essences which lack existence». If not, one must endorse a strong version of the “principle of plenitude”, i.e., the claim that «nothing can be conceived which will not exist at some time in the whole of eternity». In other words, Leibniz is asking if one has to accept the ancient conception (typical of the Aristotelian tradition) that interpreted modalities in a temporal sense, from which the principle of plenitude follows as a sort of corollary (the possible being defined as something which will eventually be realized at some time, from which it follows that what will not be realized at a certain instant of time is impossible)³.

all these substances share the same common spatiotemporal and causal framework, which means just that substances are reciprocally connected only if every state of every substance in this world is spatiotemporally and causally ordered with respect to every state of every other substance in the same world. For this way of understanding relations of connection, see *New Essays*, II, xi, §4, and, especially, IV, i, §3. Cf. also A VI 4: 944. The best explanation of Leibniz’s thesis of universal connection from the point of view of his theory of relations is to be found in Mugnai (1992: 50–55 and 126–131).

3 On the contrast between the temporal (statistical) and the logical account of modalities in the medieval tradition, see Knuuttila (1993). The temporal/statistical account of possibility

A few lines later in the same text, Leibniz returns to this distinction between two senses of impossibility:

The origin of impossibility is two-fold: one from essence, the other from existence or, positing as actual (*ab existentia seu positione*). In the same way, there is a twofold reason for impossible problems: one, when they are analysed into a contradictory equation, and the other, when there is an analysis into an imaginary quantity, for which no place can be understood. This is an excellent image of those things which neither have been, nor are, nor will be. (A VI 3: 494/DSR 7).

Unactualized possibilities («those things which neither have been, nor are, nor will be») are those that cannot find a place in the series of things that constitutes the actual world, for they have no position within it. The term “position” is used as a synonym of “existence”⁴. To say that a thing exists, at least from the point of view of our limited knowledge, amounts to saying that it can be found “somewhere” in the spatiotemporal framework of our series of things⁵. The latter, notice, is explicitly characterized as a totality: «All things which are, will be, and have been, constitute a whole (*totum*)», and this, as I will show, is a feature the young Leibniz does not extend to the case of bare possibles.

A concrete example of the way in which things constitute a whole can be taken from a paper of this very same period, in which Leibniz wants to defend the principle that the same quantity of motion is conserved (the Cartesian rule of conservation will be questioned only a few years later). As an objection against the principle, he makes the example of the impact between two perfectly homogeneous rectilinear bodies, from which «it will follow that motion is lost, and that as a consequence the entire harmony of things is disturbed». «It can be replied», notes Leibniz, «that such bodies neither have existed, do exist, nor will exist; but this is not intellectually satisfying. For such a body certainly remains possible». A few lines later, Leibniz explicitly remarks that it is important to emphasize «the way in which impossible things differ from those which neither are nor will be nor have been» (A VI 3: 468/DSR 17).

as well as the principle of plenitude were strongly defended in Hobbes's *De Corpore*, X, 4: «Ideoque actus omnis possibilis aliquando productetur (Therefore, every possible act will eventually be realized)» (OL I: 115). The distinction between the logical and temporal (and causal) sense of possibility is plainly acknowledged by Leibniz in the *Theodicy*, §235 (GP VI 257–258).

4 «Position [...] is a certain relation to other things insofar as existence is concerned, or the coexistence of things, for even those things that do not coexist in the same moment nonetheless coexist: they exist in the same year or in the same century» (*Tentamina de Definitione Quantitatis*, ca. 1679, A VI 4:164).

5 On temporal position, see A VI 3:581/DSR 103–105. The concept of “position” will be investigated by Leibniz in his papers on the *mathesis universalis*; cf. A VI 4: 391, 637, 868, 870. For later passages, see LH IV, 7C, Bl.94r; C 9 and 540–541. In the last of these texts, Leibniz distinguishes between “position” and “situation”: situation is a kind of position, i.e., *positio coexistenti*; there is therefore spatial situation, but only temporal position.

6.2. Possibles as Imaginary Entities

Returning to the late-1675 text quoted at the beginning of the previous section, one can see that Leibniz is comparing his twofold account of (im)possibility, essential and existential, to the distinction between two ways in which algebraic problems can be said to be impossible: «one, when they are analysed into a contradictory equation, and the other when there is an analysis into an imaginary quantity, for which no place can be understood (*cujus nullus intelligi potest situs*)». Reference to “imaginary quantities” has to be traced back to Leibniz’s interest in the problem of attaching a meaning to the square root of a negative number. In particular, we know that Leibniz, in this very same period, was seriously concerned with the question of providing some meaning to imaginary quantities, especially as far as the so-called “irreducible case” in Cardano’s formula for the roots of the cubic equation was concerned.

Exactly in the same period in which Leibniz drafted the reflections on impossibility quoted above, he was also concluding a series of studies devoted to the problem of finding a general analytic solution to cubic equations⁶. Reading his papers, one can see that he clearly realized that when a cubic equation has three real solutions, Cardano’s formula delivers a complex expression, even though all the solutions are real (and distinct), a fact that can be proved by resorting to geometrical methods⁷.

Among the documents of this period, some interesting remarks on imaginary quantities can be found in Leibniz’s drafts dated December 1675. These reflections are contained in a series of drafts recording Leibniz’s discussions with Tschirnhaus on algebraic equations. In one of these drafts, Tschirnhaus attempts to provide a geometrical interpretation of imaginary quantities by means of a straight line orthogonal to the line representing the series of negative and positive numbers, where the former works as the y -axis and the latter as the x -axis of a Cartesian system of coordinates (A VII 2: 745, Fig.1):

Leibniz clearly had in mind that the main difficulty concerning complex numbers is the fact that they cannot be located within the number line. After having explained Tschirnhaus’s geometrical representation, he writes the following observation in the margin:

There are two origins of the impossibility. One originates from the nature of magnitude, for example when one says that $1 = 3$. The other originates from the nature of situation (*ex natura situs*), when we want to add in one single quantity 1 and , in which there is a contradiction, because they cannot be placed on one line. (A VII 2: 745)

6 On Leibniz’s algebraic works in Paris, see Hofmann (1974:143–163). See also the introduction to A VII 2.

7 See especially *De Resolutionibus Aequationum Cubicarum Triradicalium* (October 1675, A VII 2: 678–700); cf. also Leibniz’s remarks on Bombelli’s *Algebra*, A VII 2: 659–667 and 668–670; for the details, see Ottaviani (2021a).

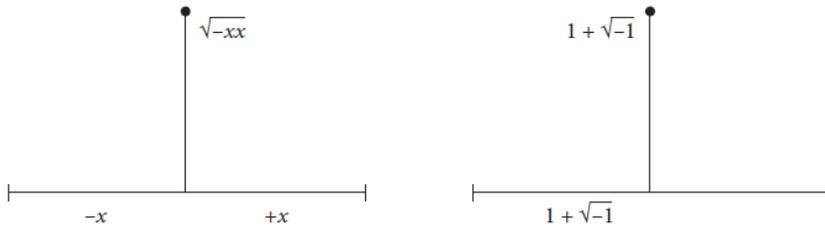


Fig.1: Leibniz and Tschirnhaus's geometrical interpretation of imaginary roots
(A VII 2: 745)

This passage is almost identical to that quoted above (in section 6.1). Here Leibniz makes it clear that the kind of impossibility he ascribes to complex numbers is to be found in the impossibility of the imaginary quantities being ordered, i.e., placed in the number line. The relations “greater than” and “smaller than” do not hold in the field of complex numbers, and, therefore, there is something contradictory in adding 1 and $\sqrt{-1}$, even if this contradiction does not arise from the “nature of magnitude”. The same simile between non-actualized possibilities and imaginary roots will be repeated and expanded in a text from the 1680s, where Leibniz provides also a very clear example in order to show that an imaginary root (like $\sqrt{-1}$) «involves some notion, though it cannot be exhibited» (A VI 4: 1448/AG 21).

Leibniz's statement that imaginary numbers cannot be considered as contradictory notions in themselves (as if they were “almost nothing”) seems to be addressed to Jean Prestet, whose *Elemens de Mathematiques* (1675) was a text he carefully studied in this period⁸. In his remarks on the book, Leibniz notes that Prestet «calls the root of a negative magnitude a contradiction. He shows it is impossible because it is neither positive nor negative, because there is nothing in between positive and negative numbers, except zero». For Leibniz, imaginary roots are not to be regarded as contradictories, even if they are impossible magnitudes: the impossibility at stake corresponds to the impossibility of their “exhibition”, i.e., their geometrical construction (see A VII 2: 791)⁹.

8 Jean Prestet was a follower of Malebranche, and, at its first appearance, his handbook of mathematics was attributed to Malebranche himself. On Prestet, see Robinet (1960). On the relationship between Leibniz and Prestet in Paris, see Robinet (1955: 25–27) and the texts collected at 49–66. On Leibniz and the mathematicians of Malebranche's circle, one can now see Bella (2022: 33ff).

9 Here Leibniz has in mind the geometrical construction of a quadratic (or second-degree) equation in the Cartesian sense: the solutions of the equation are produced by the intersection

These remarks are extremely relevant to the issue discussed at the outset, i.e., the twofold analogy proposed in the Paris notes: that between the world and a “series of things”, and that between bare possibilities and imaginary quantities. When comparing the world with a series, Leibniz has in mind the idea of (what we would call) an ordered set. As he writes in *De affectibus*, drafted in 1679: «A series is a multiplicity of items ordered by means of a rule (*Series est multitudo cum ordinis regula*)»¹⁰. In another list of definitions, he adds: «Order is a relation according to prior and posterior. A series is an ordered multiplicity» (A VI 4: 33). The notion of order is understood as «a relation among a plurality of things by which any of them is distinguished from any other», and when order concerns existing things, Leibniz makes it clear that spatiotemporal relations play a prominent role in distinguishing things¹¹.

The parallel with numbers is an explicit one, because Leibniz often repeats the Aristotelian dictum that “the essences of things are like numbers”; as the identity of each number is completely determined by its position in the number series (and cannot be altered without altering the very essence of the number), the identity of each individual is, in the same way, determined (once and for all) by its position in the “series of things”, as has been pre-established by God from eternity¹².

Intuitively, then, the idea of the world as a “series of things” means that our world should be regarded – at least from a conceptual point of view (i.e., as the idea of the world in God’s mind, so to say) – as an ordered succession, in which every member of the series has a well-defined and completely determined relation of connection with any other member of the series, and only with them.

of a circle with a straight line. The case of the imaginary solution corresponds to the failure of the intersection; see GP VII 73–74. This idea had already been discussed by Descartes in his *Geometry* (AT VI: 375ff).

10 *De affectibus*, April 1679 (A VI 4: 1426). In these drafts the notion of a “series” is extended to merely possible worlds as well; cf. Schepers (2003).

11 The last quotation is taken from a table of definitions at C 476: «*Ordo est relatio inter multa, qua quodlibet a quolibet discriminatur*»; cf. also A VI 4: 868; A VI 4: 227; and LH IV, 3, 5, Bl. 20: «Order is the relation of a variety of relations which arise from a multitude of terms or ingredients. In this way, each of these ingredients can be distinguished from all the others (*L'ordre est le rapport d'une variété de rapports qui naissent d'une multitude de termes ou ingrediens. De sorte que par ce moyen on peut distinguer chacun de ces ingrediens de tout les autres*)». Time and space are often characterized as the order of existing things, respectively, of successive and simultaneous ones; cf. A VI 4: 632n; 868; C 479–480.

12 See, for instance, A VI 4: 1352; 1389. This analogy had been emphasized by Leibniz himself, who, on several occasions, employed an arithmetic simile in order to describe the derivation of the essences of finite things from the essence of God, stressing the fact that all the numbers (the essences of finite beings) are just different ways of composing the same unities (i.e., the divine essence itself). This approach, in particular, will be typical of Leibniz’s metaphysical papers in his Paris notes, like in A VI 3: 518–519; see also A VI 3: 385; 474; 573. But see already a marginal note in A VI 1: 495. On Leibniz’s interpretation of *essentiae rerum sunt sicut numeri*, see Mugnai (2018).

In a sense, the very same idea of a universal connection among all things seems to be a consequence of Leibniz's understanding of the total order of the series of things¹³. The idea that each member of the series entertains relations of connection with other members of the series, and only with them, makes full sense of the analogy between pure possibles and imaginary roots. Unactualized possibilities, though not contradictory in themselves, do not share this kind of ordering relation.

6.3. Leibniz's Rejection of the Collective Account of Possibilities

The analogy with imaginary quantities of algebra was regarded by the young Leibniz as an excellent image of «those things which neither have been, nor are, nor will be». They are said to be impossible only in a relative sense, i.e., insofar as they have no position (or situation) in the series of things that constitutes our world. Our world, by contrast, contains «[a]ll things which are, will be, and have been», taken as a *totum*, i.e., in a collective sense. When Leibniz talks of this series as a whole (*totum*), one might think he is entertaining the idea that the world is a sort of individual (like the mereological sum of all the members of the series), but this would contradict a claim he repeats many times, namely that the world is not an individual, but, rather, an aggregate of individuals.

As far as the young Leibniz is concerned, however, things are a bit more ambiguous, especially from a terminological point of view. Leibniz's nominalist attitude, according to which there is nothing over and above individual entities, seems to be in conflict with the holistic intuition, according to which the world is something whose parts are connected with each other. In a passage tentatively dated around 1679, the universal connection of all things leads Leibniz to say that the world might be regarded as a sort of individual: «It is certain that the world is just like one single thing and every thing is really affected by the change of all the other ones»¹⁴.

In an apparent reframing of the question a few years later (between 1683 and 1685), to an understanding of the world as «what is composed by all creatures», he adds: «Here, I do not define whether it is an aggregate made out of them [creatures], like an army is composed of men, or a being in itself (*ens per se*), as an animal is composed of its organs. The latter would be the case if the world

13 It has been suggested that the order of the series can be interpreted in a strict mathematical sense (i.e., as an asymmetric, transitive, and total relation); cf. Mondadori (1978: 165). That order requires universal connection is stated by Leibniz in a letter to Sophie (March 1706): «But order requires that there be a connection between the different states [of a substance], and it is for this reason that I am accustomed to say that the present is big with the future [...]» (A I 25: 720/LTS 356).

14 *Definitiones*, ca.1679 (A VI 4: 308n); cf. also A VI 4: 31, where the world is counted as an individual insofar as it is a *species monadica*; see especially Rutherford (2021). On the idea that every change in one thing affects all the others, see Mugnai (1992: 50–51).

were finite and had a soul» (A VI 4: 567). The latter solution, i.e., the idea of a soul of the world, will be sharply rejected by Leibniz, however, who will identify a link between the infinity of the world and the rejection of the world's soul (A VI 4: 1492 and 1509)¹⁵. From then on, he will continue to deny that the world might be counted as one individual.

The holistic character of the universal connection will nevertheless be retained by Leibniz, since it is a feature that characterizes the world only at the ideal, conceptual level. The whole question can be summarized in the following way: given his sympathies for a nominalist ontology, Leibniz believes that the only actually existing things are individual substances, whereas relations between them have only a mental nature. His intense work on the notion of a *series rerum*, however, focuses on the notion of the order obtaining among the members of the series, especially as far as relations of connection between them are concerned (spatiotemporal and causal relations, in particular)¹⁶.

This is one of the main developments of the Paris years, when the notion of the world as a series comes to the fore. Leibniz maintains that the ordering relations among individual substances holds only at the ideal level, but this does not mean that such an order is an arbitrary or imaginary one, because it is also the model on the basis of which this world has been chosen and created by God.

What must be emphasized now is that, by this stage in the development of his thought (1675–76), Leibniz believed that only actual things could be gathered together in a (maximal and mutually connected) series, whereas this does not hold in the case of non-actualized possibilities. Connection has been discussed already; maximality, on the other hand, follows from Leibniz's commitment to a weak version of the principle of plenitude: the claim that everything which is compossible with something actual will be realized in the course of time (according to a predetermined "law of the series")¹⁷.

As Leibniz writes in a Paris text, «possibles cannot be understood one at a time (*in singulis*) without understanding the order of the universe» (A VI 3: 401/LoC 95). The context of this sentence clarifies that he is talking of actualized

15 Cf. Brown (2005). A potentially ambiguous passage of the *Theodicy* is §9 of the first part, where Leibniz speaks of the "essence", or, what is the same, the "numerical individuality" of this world (GP VI 197). The context makes clear that he is talking of this world taken *sub ratione possibilitatis*, i.e., at the conceptual level of ideas in the mind of God.

16 These reflections on the holistic structure of the "series of things" must be integrated with the "cosmological account" of compossibility defended by Donald Rutherford in several papers. For a synthetic presentation, see Rutherford (2018).

17 In his later writings, Leibniz will often characterize the essence of an individual substance as its «law of the series». The first occurrence of this idea is in his reading notes on Foucher's critique of Malebranche: «The essence of the substance consists in the primitive force of acting, or, which is the same, in the law of the succession of its changes, like the nature of the *series* in the case of numbers» (A VI 3: 326); the Academy editors date Leibniz's remarks on Foucher to 1676 but this passage is a later addition on the manuscript. On the notion of the law of the series, see Rutherford (1995: 148–154). See also Nachtomý–Ottaviani (2025).

possibilities only, i.e., things compossible with what is actual. As far as unrealized possibilities are conceivable by us, they, on the other hand, can be understood only *in singulis*.

This point is emphasized in several passages from the Paris notes. See, for instance, the following two remarks, the first written in March 1676:

[1] Now I finally see that there is no number or multiplicity of non-existent possibles, that is, things which neither are, nor were, nor will be, because by their very position, that is accidentally, they are impossible. (A VI 3: 391/LoC 53)

The same point is repeated in another text from the end of the same year:

[2] It is not surprising that the number of all numbers, all possibilities, all relations or reflections are not distinctly understood; for they are imaginary and have nothing that corresponds to them in reality (*a parte rei*). For example, suppose that there is a relation between *a* and *b*, and that that relation is called *c*; and let a new relation be considered between *a* and *c*, and let that relation be called *d*, and so on to infinity. It does not seem that any one may say that all those relations are true and real ideas. Perhaps only those things are purely intelligible which can be produced; that is, which have been or will be produced. (A VI 3: 399–400/DSR 115)

Passage 1 might be regarded as anomalous, because it looks like a strong rejection of the subsistence of non-actualized possibilities. The same conclusion is stated in a somewhat tentative way in the last line of passage 2. Such a rejection, however, would be very strange, because Leibniz, in the *Confessio Philosophi* (1672–73), had already defended the opposite view, claiming that there are possible things which do not belong to the actual series of things: namely, possibles that do not exist and will never exist.

In the *Confessio*, indeed, Leibniz criticizes the views of those who maintained that things not realized at some time (past, present, or future) are impossible:

[...] if the essence of a thing can be conceived, provided that it is conceived clearly and distinctly (e.g., *a species of animal with an uneven number of feet, also a species of immortal beast*), then it must already be held to be possible, and its contrary will not be necessary, even if its existence may be contrary to the harmony of things and the existence of God, and consequently it never will actually exist, but it will remain *per accidens* impossible. Hence, all those who call impossible whatever neither was nor is nor will be are mistaken¹⁸.

Contrary to what seemed to be the case at first glance, there is no tension between this text and the remarks in passages 1 and 2 above. What Leibniz says in

18 A VI 3: 128/CP 57 (I have omitted “absolutely, i.e., per se” after “impossible” in the last line of the quoted text, since it has been added to the original text by Leibniz only at the end of the 1670s).

the *Confessio*, when he points out that the never-to-be-actualized possible can be said to be impossible only *per accidens* is literally repeated in passage 1, where he notes that non-actualized possibilities are impossible accidentally, i.e., by their “very position”, which is also the reason why, from the end of 1675, he establishes an analogy between non-actualized possibilities and imaginary numbers.

In these texts, Leibniz does not deny that there are things that are merely possible in a logical sense, but only that those possibles which do not belong to the actual series of things can be counted or enumerated, since they do not form a whole – that is, a totality – as is the case with those that are actualized¹⁹. I take this as evidence that Leibniz, by this time, had not yet entertained the idea of a plurality of possible worlds, because, as we know from his later writings, each possible world can be understood as an alternative “series of things”, a sort of whole or totality of mutually connected individual concepts. At this stage, there is, strictly speaking, only one series of things, which is unified and closed under spatiotemporal (and causal) relations; and this is also the reason why those entities that do not have a place within such a totality (and are not connected with any of the actually existing ones) must be exiled to the field of imaginary entities.

Again, this amounts to saying that merely possible things can be understood only *in singulis*, in sharp contrast with actual things: they can be accounted only in a *distributive* and not in a *collective* sense, because they are not members of any connected series of things. All of this perfectly matches with the analogy between bare possibles and imaginary roots, on the one hand, and between actualized possibilities and the number line, on the other.

This also explains why, in passage 2, Leibniz claims that one cannot distinctly understand “the number of all possibilities” (as well as the number of all numbers and relations). Recall that in the *Confessio* he says that the notion of a possible entity is one which can be clearly and distinctly conceived (provided it does not entail a contradiction). The number of all possibilities, however, cannot be clearly and distinctly conceived because it entails a contradiction, exactly

19 The rejection of a plurality of possible worlds does not logically entail the rejection of the reality of what is merely possible. However, Leibniz does not seem to have envisaged that possibles are real and true essences (having the status of ideas in the mind of God) until he advanced the view that God chooses among a plurality of possible worlds, which constitute the object of his understanding; see Ottaviani (2016a). In his letter to Wedderkopf (1671), it is true that Leibniz says that «God wills those things that he perceives to be the best [...] and selects them, so to speak, from the infinite number of all the possibles»; but a few lines later he specifies that: «essences of things are just like numbers, and they contain the very possibility of entities, which God does not bring about, as he does existence, *since these very possibilities – or ideas of things – coincide rather with God himself*» (A II 1²:186/CP 3, italics mine). The statement that possibles and essences coincide with God himself is in keeping with the nominalist rejection of the presence of ideas in the mind of God; see Chapter 2 above.

like Leibniz's favourite example of an implicitly contradictory notion, that of "the number of all numbers"²⁰.

Passage 2 refers to another issue relevant to our topic: the numbers of all possibles, numbers and relations are each treated by Leibniz as something to which nothing corresponds *a parte rei*²¹. What Leibniz means is that pure possibles, numbers, and relations all share the same status insofar as they are abstract notions. There are two issues contained in this characterization of possibilities as abstract notions that must be made explicit. The first is another way of saying that Leibniz did not yet envisage the idea of a plurality of possible worlds, because possible worlds are inhabited, so to speak, by "possible individuals" or complete individual concepts; relations of connection between members of a series hold only at the level of what is individual (be it actual or merely possible). At this stage, however, individuality seems to be strictly related to actuality, whereas possibilities are merely general and incomplete notions. Even in his 1675 letter to Foucher, Leibniz seems to count possibilities as referring to general rather than individual notions. There he talks of eternal truths concerning entities like general figures and not individual ones (see A II 1²: 387–388).

The second issue is that, in the case of abstract notions, if one conceives them as something real (as "entities" in a proper ontological sense), then it is possible to generate an infinite regress, like the kind of "third-man argument" (or "Bradley's regress") developed by Leibniz about relations in passage 2. On this point, Leibniz is repeating the kind of criticism of abstractions he had already advanced in his *Preface to Nizolius* (see Chapter 3 above). As I have already pointed out, the young Leibniz favoured a strong form of nominalism, inspired by his reading of Hobbes, according to which only what is actual is real, and only individual things are actual: abstractions (like essences or relations taken in themselves, i.e., isolated from their bearers) are considered as unreal rather than as belonging to a (more or less Platonic) domain of ideal entities. This approach should be contrasted with the conceptualist attitude at work in the late Leibniz,

20 «[T]hose who consider the world as an infinite thing use hardly accurate expressions, just like when we are discussing the number of all possibles or other things of this kind, which can be named rather than understood, for none of these is one thing (*qui Mundum considerant velut rem infinitam, parum accuratas habent expressiones, quemadmodum cum de numero omnium possibilium sermo est, aut aliis hujusmodi quae nominari magis quam intelligi possunt, nihil enim horum una res est*)» (LH XXXV, 7, 10, Bl. 8r, in Arthur–Ottaviani 2025: 161).

21 Ishiguro (1990: 135), stresses the fact that Leibniz is not saying here that all relations are imaginary: «It seems clear that what makes the idea of all relations imaginary, and not have anything corresponding to it in reality, is the infinite totality involved, not its being of relations». (The same remark holds in the case of *possibilia* and numbers as well.) Ishiguro, however, says nothing about the last part of the passage, where Leibniz describes intelligible things (to be contrasted with imaginary ones) only as those which can be produced, i.e., those which are, have been or will be produced.

where essences, relations, and possibilities now share, by contrast, the status of ideal entities (as concepts in the mind of God).

In the last part of passage 2, Leibniz also says that intelligible things, which are “true and real ideas”, are only those that can be produced, i.e., those realizable in time. He seems to assume that what is “intelligible” must be taken in a narrower (and stronger) sense than what is merely “conceivable”, even though, unfortunately, he does not say too much about the difference between the two. To my knowledge, there is only one other comparable reference in a rather obscure passage in the Paris notes which reads as follows:

A thinking being is necessary so that certain things which do not exist are at any rate thought – namely, those which deserve to be thought rather than others. Therefore, though everything possible is thinkable, there will be chosen some things which will be really thought. (A VI 3: 475/DSR 29)

A similar idea seems to be envisaged in a passage where he repeats his criticism of the reality of relations: «there is no number of relations, which are true entities only when they are thought by us; [...] and so they are not real entities, or possibles, except when they are thought about» (A VI 3: 495/LoC 83).

6.3.1. Appendix. Distributive vs. Collective Knowledge of the Possibles. Leibniz and Fabri

In addition to what I have said so far, I would like to add that Leibniz’s conception of possibles in the Paris notes seems to have much in common with the view defended by Honoré Fabri in his *Summula Theologica* (published in 1669), where the French Jesuit raises the question of the way in which God knows the possibles.

Fabri’s answer is that «all the possibles are known by God, but they are not known all together (*collective*), for, in this sense, they are not a totality, for the potential infinity excludes a collection or a totality». He adds, moreover, that, if God were to know the possibles collectively, he himself would be wrong, or, better still, he would contemplate just an *ens rationis*: «all the possibles taken collectively, indeed, form the concept of the non-being, or the impossible». Fabri affirms, to the contrary, that from the point of view of divine knowledge, «there is only one act of cognition, through which God attains all the possibles in a distributive way (*distributive*), i.e., this possible thing, and this, and this, and so on, but never a totality, for there is none, or a last one, since there is none»²².

Fabri’s reflections are based on considerations on the nature of the infinite, especially the rejection of actual infinity and the defence of potential infinity as the only legitimate notion of infinity. His reflections on the distributive

²² H. Fabri, *Summula Theologica*, Lugduni 1669, Tractatus I, Cap. 3, xii, 26 a-b; cf. Grua (1953: 265).

knowledge of the possibles, indeed, can be found in his *Metaphysica Demonstrativa* (a book mentioned by the young Leibniz, A VI 1: 163–164, and quoted in Chapter 3 above), in the chapter devoted to the infinite. In this text, Fabri proposes a long series of arguments against actual infinity (he gives a nice presentation of Galilei’s paradox, based on the one-to-one correspondence between the number of men and the number of their eyes).

His main claim is that there can be no maximum, no totality and no last number of all things²³. Amongst the many objections he takes into account, he also mentions the following: «God can produce all possible creatures, but there can be no greater multitude of things, therefore it should be the maximal one». Fabri replies that the first premise («God can produce all possible creatures») is false when taken in a collective sense: though God can produce each possible creature in a distributive sense (this and this and this, and so on), he cannot produce all possibles in a collective sense, for «there is nothing such as a total collection of possible things; therefore, if all possibles are taken in a collective sense, they are impossible»²⁴. When the expression “all the possibles” is taken in a collective sense, indeed, it is a non-referential term (a subject without supposition, to use the Scholastic jargon)²⁵.

6.4. The Evolution of Leibniz’s Ideas. An Overview

In both the *Confessio* and in the Paris notes Leibniz is eager to emphasize that the status of non-existent possibilities is to be equated with that of fictional

23 Fabri’s *Metaphysica Demonstrativa* was published by Fabri’s pupil, Pierre Mousnier in 1648: see *Metaphysica Demonstrativa sive Scientia Rationum Universalium*, auctore P. Mosnerio, cuncta excerpta ex praelectionibus R. P. H. Fabri, Lugduni 1648: 443, prop. 8.

24 *Metaphysica Demonstrativa*, 444. Fabri adds that God can produce partial collections of possibilities, like one hundred men, one thousand men, but no total collection (all possible men).

25 Cf. *Metaphysica Demonstrativa*, 446 (prop. 12), and 448–49 (prop. 14). God sees everything possible only in a distributive sense, but he does not see them *simul vel collective*, «for all possibles cannot exist simultaneously, i.e., they cannot be produced simultaneously; they are simultaneous only in the sense of “simultaneity of power” (*simultate potentiae*), as the Schoolmen say, i.e., potentially». What Fabri has in mind here is that possibility is not closed under conjunction, so to say, i.e., that if two things are possible in themselves, it does not follow that they are also possible *simul*, or taken together: «*potentiâ simultatis, id est non est potentia ad hoc, ut omnia simul producantur, et simul existant*». And in the following lines: «You may ask: does one who perceives those possibilities perceive them in a finite way? I answer: he perceives an infinity potentially, yet he also perceives that only a finite number can actually exist – or rather, that an infinite number cannot exist. That is, he does not perceive any determinate finite number of things that can exist; instead, he perceives a potential infinity. This power is not for the existence of all of them collectively, but for the existence of yet another, and yet another, without end (*Dices, qui videt illa possibilia, videtne finite; Respondeo, videt infinita potentia; videt tamen finite tantum posse existere; seu potius, non posse existere infinita; id est non videt quidem ullum finitum numerum determinatum eorum quae possunt existere; id est videt infinitum potentia; nempe haec potentia non est ad existentiam omnium collective, sed ad existentiam ulterioris, et ulterioris in infinitum*)» (*Metaphysica Demonstrativa*, 460–461).

or imaginary entities, as clearly shown by the parallel with imaginary numbers. Limited to this stage of his thought (and no further), I believe that one can conclude that Leibniz regarded non-actualized possibilities as being “intrinsically possible” (i.e., non-contradictory in themselves), even though this does not imply that they are “metaphysically possible” as well: according to the core argument of the *Confessio*, the actual world turns out to be metaphysically necessary²⁶. This is a consequence – perhaps unintended – of Leibniz’s original rejection of the idea of a plurality of possible worlds.

What I have shown so far is that a non-actualized possible (a possible in itself) is just what does not find a place (has no position) in our “series of things”, and, for this reason, is to be equated with something merely imaginary. This explains why Leibniz’s first and favourite example of a non-existent possible has always been a fictional character, as in the case of Barclay’s *Argenis*, which he quotes in the *Confessio Philosophi* (A VI 3: 128–129). At this stage of his philosophical development, there is only one “series of things”, i.e., the actual world, which is spatially and temporally unified (in the sense that each member of the actual world is connected with any other member of it by means of spatiotemporal relations; this does not hold in the case of non-existent possibles). On the other hand, things possible-in-themselves are not (yet) organized in series, and, for this reason, they are said to be only accidentally impossible.

Things will rapidly change, at least in the period from the end of 1676 to the end of 1677, when, in opposition to a Spinozist kind of necessitarianism, Leibniz introduces a plurality of merely possible series as the only way to save the contingency of the actual world²⁷. In texts from the period 1677–79 such as *De Affectibus*, Leibniz will intensively work on the idea of a plurality of the “series of things”, starting from an analysis of the “series of thoughts”; the connection between the former and the latter is given by his conceptualist reading of possible worlds as ideas in the mind of God²⁸. It will follow that the kind of connection the Paris notes acknowledged as a feature of the actual world must be extended to the level of what is purely possible, especially possible individuals and possible worlds²⁹.

26 This view has been defended by Griffin (2013), who extends, however, the necessitarian interpretation to the writings of the late Leibniz. The necessitarian strand of the *Confessio Philosophi* has been discussed at length in Rateau (2019: 54ff); see also Ottaviani (2016a: 31–35).

27 For an account of the genesis of Leibniz’s views on modality, see also the seminal paper by Schepers (1965); cf. also Rateau (2019: 88–108).

28 Cf. Di Bella (2005a: 99–111); Schepers (2003); Dumas Primbault (2020).

29 The expression “possible world(s)” does not appear in texts earlier than 1686, having probably been borrowed from Malebranche, who makes reference to possible worlds in his 1680 *Treatise on Nature and Grace* (Malebranche 1992: 260); cf. in particular Leibniz’s remarks on Arnauld’s letter, June 1686: «For as there exists an infinite number of possible worlds, there exists also an infinite number of laws, some peculiar to one world, some to another [...]»

This will also lead to a partial reshaping of the notion of compossibility and impossibility. For the mature Leibniz, compossibility represents the relation that partitions things possible in themselves into different possible worlds. In the Paris notes, however, along with the notion of connection holding at the level of actual things, there is only the idea of impossibility as “accidental impossibility” (or impossibility “by position”), i.e., as the feature of those things that are incompatible with what exist in this series of things³⁰.

More or less in the same period as that in which the texts discussed above were written, however, and precisely in April 1676, Leibniz introduced for the first time the idea of a plurality of worlds. Moving from the criteria for distinguishing reality from imagination, or, better still, the real world from the worlds of dreams, he suggests that the unity of space, time, and, then, the unity of the world, has to be explained in terms of our minds’ having coherent perceptions. Thus, if we make the hypothesis that there can be “alien minds” (minds whose perceptions are not in agreement with ours), then, at the same time, there can also be a plurality of actually existing worlds (each one closed under space and time, and having its own natural laws). Among the undesired consequences of such a line of reasoning, however, is the effect it has of weakening the primacy of the actual world, which was Leibniz’s point of departure. This will be the topic of my next chapter.

6.5. Superessentialism without Complete Concepts: the *Confessio Philosophi*

Before moving on, however, there is more to be said yet about Leibniz’s understanding of the world as a *series rerum* as it was presented in the Paris period, with reference this time to the theological account provided in the *Confessio Philosophi*. It should be remarked that the notion of the actual world as a unified and well-ordered series of things clearly emerges only in the text of the *Confessio*, whereas, as far as I could see, it is completely absent from the writings of the Mainz period. The point I want to emphasize here is that the notion of a “series of things” plays a fundamental role in Leibniz’s theodicy, i.e., his strategy for defending God’s justice from the charge of having created evil in the world.

In the *Confessio*, indeed, Leibniz holds that the existence of sins is inevitably due to the arrangement of this series of things, and the existence and

(A II 2: 47/LA 43); see also *De Libertate, Fato, Gratia Dei*, ca. 1686–87, A VI 4: 1612. In his writings from the end of the 1670s, Leibniz explicitly refers to the different ways in which the world could have been created by God (without explicitly employing the expression “possible world”); see, for instance, A VI 4: 1362: «Of all the possible ways in which the universe, or the series of things, could exist, one way is the most perfect»; and A VI 4: 2231: «I agree that the world could have been created in a thousand other ways (*Je demeure d'accord que le monde pouvoit estre fait de mille autres façons*)».

30 Conversely, what actually exists is what is possible in itself and compossible with other things, given that not all possibles are mutually compatible: see A VI 3: 582; see also Nachtomy (2016).

arrangement of this (and just this) series of things does not depend on God's will but, rather, on the harmony of things or the existence of God (see A VI 3:121/CP 41).

The Philosopher (Leibniz's spokesman in the dialogue) claims that the arrangement of things which constitutes our world cannot be modified, since it is entirely contained, in all its details, in God's understanding, or in the nature of things or eternal ideas (which are simply equated in this text with the existence of God). This means that God, in creating this world, cannot but create the "full package", as it were: he cannot remove something (like sinful actions) at his own discretion, because in so doing so he would just destroy or remove the entire series of things. Notice also that Leibniz in this text does not clearly distinguish between the existence of God and his understanding, and, more importantly, between God's understanding and the ideas contained in it³¹.

According to Leibniz's mature account, a world freed of Judas' sin (and its consequences) would have been less perfect (taken as a whole) than our world, in which Judas' sin does occur, and that is the reason why God abstained from creating it. In the *Confessio*, however, both contingent and necessary truths (like mathematical and logical truths) are treated as a pair, both being brought back to the same principle: namely, to a generalized version of the PSR (one in which, as we will see in a moment, Leibniz conflates logical and causal relations).

About the impossibility that the actual series of things could be changed or even slightly modified (for instance, by removing Judas' sin), Leibniz writes:

It is no more possible that from the same ground – and a ground sufficient and entire, as God is with respect to the universe – there should result opposed consequences, that is that different things should follow from the same thing [i.e., that there could be a violation of universal harmony], than it is possible that the same thing should be different from itself [i.e., something absolutely, logically impossible]. (A VI 3: 123/CP 45)

God is understood as the *ratio sufficiens et integra* of the existence of the universe, and this is connected with Leibniz's early formulation of the PSR at the very beginning of the dialogue, where the Philosopher says: «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» (A VI 3: 118/CP 33)³².

31 A VI 3: 121–122/CP 43; see also Leibniz's 1671 letter to Wedderkopf, where he explicitly says that «possibilities or ideas of things coincide rather with God himself» (A II 1²: 186/L 146). We must also emphasize the fact that the young Leibniz does not seem to clearly distinguish between God and the harmony of things; cf. Moll (1999).

32 Such a proof of the PSR is nothing but a reformulation of the formal proof that Leibniz provided few years before, *Demonstratio Propositionum Primarum*, around 1671–72, A VI 2: 483. On Leibniz's first formulation of PSR, see Piro (2003) and (2008).

Leibniz's proof of the PSR is clearly modelled on Hobbes' definition of *causa integra* as the aggregate of all the requisites for the existence of something. Both Hobbes and the young Leibniz, indeed, conceive the sufficient ground (*ratio sufficiens*) in terms of *requisites* for existing. Roughly speaking, a "requisite" is a necessary condition for the existence of something, but, at the same time, is also understood as a necessary condition of the essence of a thing³³. For instance, the elements of a definition (the conceptual notes that make up the definition of something, like "rational" and "animal" in the case of "human being") constitute the requisites of the defined thing, i.e., that without which that particular thing could not be conceived³⁴.

That of *requisite*, thus, is a flexible notion which serves to explain the relationship between the properties of a thing and its essence (since the definition provides us with the essence of a thing) as well as the relationship between an effect and its entire cause (*causa plena*). Such a conflation between logical and causal dependence directly derives from Hobbes's notion of cause. According to Hobbes, whilst any single requisite constitutes in itself a necessary or *sine qua non* condition of the required thing, all the requisites taken together (the aggregate of all the necessary conditions) constitutes the *ratio sufficiens* of the required thing.

Coming back to the text of the *Confessio*, we can see how Leibniz applies the Hobbesian logic of requisites to the particular case of the relation between God and the actual world. Since God is the ultimate and sufficient ground of all things, it follows that, when the sufficient cause is posited, the effect cannot but follow, nor other effects could follow which are different from the one actually following. In other words, the existence of this *series rerum* is a sort of automatic consequence of God's existence: «Take away or change the series of things, and the ultimate ground of things, that is, God, will be done away with or changed» (A VI 3: 123/CP 45). In this sense, it is interesting to observe the similarity between Leibniz's position and Spinoza's argument for necessitarianism («Things could not have been produced in any other way or in any other order than they have been produced») as given in prop. xxxiii of the first part of the *Ethics*³⁵.

On this point, Leibniz was criticized by the Danish scientist and anatomist (and former friend of Spinoza) Niels Stensen, or, in Latin, Nicolaus Steno. Steno had converted to Catholicism in Italy, where he also became bishop, and

33 Cf. Di Bella (2005b). See also Di Bella (1991). On Hobbes, see especially Leijnhorst (1996).

34 «If something does not exist, certainly some requisite must be lacking because a definition is nothing but an enumeration of requisites» (A VI 3: 133/CP 69); see also A VI 3: 462–463/DSR 5 and *De Existentia*, December 1676: «For existence, it is necessary that the aggregate of all requisites is present. A requisite is that without which a thing cannot exist. The aggregate of all requisites is the full cause (*causa plena*) of a thing. There is nothing without a reason; for there is nothing without the aggregate of all requisites» (A VI 3: 587/DSR 111–113).

35 Cf. Ottaviani (2016a). On Leibniz and Spinoza, see especially Friedmann (1946); Lærke (2008).

then was sent to Hanover as apostolic vicar at the end of 1677 (Leibniz came to Hanover one year before, at the end of 1676). In that period, Leibniz spoke with him about divine and human freedom, and gave to him a copy of the *Confessio*³⁶.

6.6. The Emergence of Alternative Possible Series: Leibniz's Discussion with Steno (1677)

In his remarks on the dialogue, Steno envisages a relationship between God and the world quite different from that originally advanced by Leibniz, and, instead of an automatic derivation of the world from the nature of God, he proposes what we would call a possible-worlds view:

If there are infinitely many other series of these same things, and series of other things, in the idea of God, then [Leibniz's argument in the *Confessio*] is not valid. Hence, it does not follow that God having been posited, this series of things is posited, because others can be posited. Therefore, it is denied that this series is posited necessarily, but not as if some other thing independent of God is required, but because had he not posited this series he could have posited another. So it is not true that if *A* exists, so does *B*; rather *C* or *D*, etc., could exist. Much less is true that if *B* does not exist, *A* will not exist. On the contrary, if we distinguish between the ideas of things and things existing in reality outside these ideas, it follows certainly that if *A* is posited all possible series of things are posited in the idea of God, but it does not follow necessarily that this series rather than that series is posited in reality outside the ideas, or even that any is posited. (A VI 3: 123 fn11/CP 47)

Once a plurality of possible series has been inserted as a sort of intermediate step between God and the (position of the) actual series, Steno can deprive Leibniz's argument of its original force. It does not follow any longer that, once God is posited, this series of things is necessarily posited in actual existence («in the reality outside of the ideas»), since many other series could have been posited in its place.

Again, it does not follow that, were this world changed or removed, God's nature would be changed or removed with it, the connection between God and this world having been deprived of its original necessity (especially as far as the direction of the dependence relation going from the actual world to God is concerned). In positive terms, once God is posited, what automatically follows,

³⁶ See Steno's letter to Leibniz, November 1677, A II 1²: 576–578. Leibniz gave to Steno a copy of the *Confessio Philosophi*, on which Steno drafted a series of objections and remarks, to which Leibniz replied (both Steno's objections and Leibniz's replies were written in the margins of the manuscript). Leibniz's dialogue constituted also the basis for a discussion which took place on 7 December 1677, as we know from Leibniz's own report, A VI, 4: 1375–1383. For details, see Antognazza (2008: 202–203).

according to Steno, is only the totality of possible series of things contained in God's understanding («in the idea of God»)³⁷.

To Steno's objection that it does not follow, when God is posited, that just this series of thing is posited, but, rather, a plurality of possible series *in mente Dei*, Leibniz replies as follows: «It is just as if he were to say that God is not the sufficient cause of things. Series of other things are possible in themselves, but they are not compossible with divine wisdom» (A VI 3: 121 fn7/CP 41). And again: «This series is not posited because God is posited, except for the fact that God, who is the wisest being, wills nothing but the best. All possible series are in the idea of God, but only one under the aspect of the best (*sub ratione optima*)» (A VI 3: 123 fn11/CP 47, transl. mod.).

The presence of a plurality of possible series, which are "possible in themselves", even if not possible with respect to divine wisdom, constitute the way to avoid what, some years later, Leibniz will call the "necessitarian precipice" (A VI 4: 1653): namely, the apparently inescapable conclusion that whatever does not exist in the actual world is absolutely impossible. To avoid such a conclusion, Leibniz developed his theory of things which are possible-in-themselves, which he will always consider as the most efficacious antidote against Spinozism. Such a theory will be mentioned for the first time in the revised version of the *Confessio*, which seems to be immediately posterior to the discussion with Steno³⁸.

Such a solution, however, works only if one has already presupposed a plurality of possible worlds contained in (and conceived by) God's understanding. Thus, the presupposition of a plurality of possible worlds is a necessary condition of Leibniz's solution to the problem of contingency based on the distinction between the possible-in-itself and the hypothetically necessary, and, therefore, for the idea that the choice of the best is the task of the divine wisdom.

This does not mean, however, that Leibniz is ready to accept all the aspects of Steno's solution. Steno, indeed, claimed that, instead of the actual series of things, God could have chosen not only "series of other things" (other possible worlds) but also "other series of these same things", i.e., different arrangements of the elements of the same world (a sort of combinatorial account of possible worlds).

Whilst Leibniz accepts the first option, he cannot but reject the second one, because for him both the possibility of things and the order that subsists among them (i.e., among things taken as possibles) are completely independent of God's will (and power), exactly as numerical proportions are independent of the will of everyone. On the latter point, indeed, he retains the position

37 «God having been posited it is certain that the entire series of things, etc., is posited, insofar as these things are among God's ideas, i.e., insofar as they are possibles. But it is not certain insofar as they are actually existing things since the author has not yet demonstrated that series of other things are not possible» (A VI 3: 121 fn7/CP 41).

38 Cf. *Confessio Philosophi*, A VI 3: 128/CP 55–57 (where the passages added in the revised text are put between angled brackets); see Adams (1994: 9–22), and Blumenfeld (1988).

already adopted in the *Confessio*: a different solution, indeed, would have damaged Leibniz's solution to the problem of the presence of evil in the world, and, thus, the very same core of his theodicy.

Note, however, that in both the *Confessio* and the Paris notes Leibniz used to say that non-existing things were impossible or incompatible with divine existence *tout court*; now, by contrast, he is very careful in specifying they are impossible or incompatible with divine wisdom, but not with divine understanding as well³⁹. In a certain sense, one could say that Leibniz assumes an intermediate position between those of Steno and Spinoza. With Steno (and against Spinoza) he maintains that there is a sense in which there are other series (other worlds) insofar as they are (merely) possible. Against Steno (and with Spinoza), however, he maintains, nonetheless, that there could not be different arrangements within the same *series rerum*, that is, there could be no possible world conceived as a recombination of the same individuals or individual concepts.

The choice of the best world – in the sense of *determining which series is the best one*, not in the sense of this world passing from possibility to actuality – does not depend on divine will, because, even if a thing «exists because God wills it [...], God wills this [thing] because he sees it is the best, i.e., the most harmonious» (A VI, 3: 122 fn8/CP 43). On the other hand, the choice of the best world – this time to be interpreted in the sense of *this world passing from possibility to actuality* – is no longer regarded as a consequence of the nature (or the existence) of God; rather, it follows from the fact that God, being the most wise being, cannot but will the best (where this “cannot” must exclusively be read in terms of moral obligation, or “moral necessity”, not in terms of absolute or logical necessity).

6.7. Possible Causes and Possible Individuals

According to the approach of the *Confessio*, once God has been posited, essences (or natures of things) as well as existences are posited at the same time (and with the same kind of necessity). According to Leibniz's post-1677 approach, however, God being posited sees only the essences of things (the objects of his understanding, and, as it were, the stuff of which possible worlds are made) being necessarily posited also, whereas the existence of things does not follow without any intervention of divine will.

39 In his reply to Steno, Leibniz at first proposed again his old view, saying that the unactualized possibles are those whose existence is incompatible with the existence of God. Then, however, he crossed out the entire passage; see A VI 3:128/CP 57. As Daniel Garber correctly observes, Leibniz in the original text of the *Confessio* seems not to be interested in finding a place for God's wisdom into his account of the creation of the world. Accordingly, both finalism and final causes do not have a fundamental role to play in his account: see Garber (2009: 229). On this question see also Ottaviani (2016a).

The distinction between essence and existence is now explained by reference to the distinction between “reason” and “cause”. This point is clearly stated in a passage written more or less in the same period, in which Leibniz comments his “great axiom”, i.e., the PSR:

We must answer that, indeed, there is nothing without a reason, but that does not mean that there is nothing without a cause. For a cause is the reason for a thing outside of the thing, or its reason of production, but it is possible that the reason for a thing is inside the thing itself. And this is the case in all those things which are necessary, like the truths of mathematics which contain their reason in themselves; likewise, God, who alone is the actual reason for the existence of actual things⁴⁰.

For Leibniz the essences of things are not external to God, and since causation has been defined as production *ad extra*, they cannot be caused at all (the cause is the reason of a thing outside of the thing itself, as emphasized in the quoted passage). In the case of essences (i.e., God’s ideas), their reason is internal to things themselves, since they are placed in God’s understanding as their internal object. Thus, God can be said to be neither the cause of himself (he exists necessarily insofar as he is his own reason) nor of his understanding and his internal objects (ideas, essences)⁴¹.

In this way, Leibniz maintains the relation of logical dependence (or, in epistemic terms, of conceivability) at the level of essences (where the plurality of possible worlds is located), while restricting the relation of causal dependence to the level of existence only (that of the best possible world that God actualizes).

That said, however, it must be acknowledged that this is a rather oversimplified version of Leibniz’s view. When considering possibility not as the possibility of general essences but, rather, of individual ones (or individuals *sub ratione possibilitatis*), Leibniz himself will re-introduce causality at the level of essences, though making clear that merely possible individuals (or, better still, non-actualized complete concepts) involve in themselves causes considered as

40 *Elementa Verae Pietatis*, ca. 1677–78, A VI 4: 1360/LST 192. On this passage, see in particular Di Bella (2001). For a reconstruction of the *causa/ratio* distinction in the early modern period, see Carraud (2002).

41 In the late discussion of Spinoza contained in his notes on J. G. Wachter’s *Elucidarium Cabalisticum* (1706), Leibniz writes that: «The essences of things are coeternal with God, and the very essence of God comprehends all other essences, to the extent that God cannot perfectly be conceived without them. But existence is inconceivable without God, who is the ultimate reason for things» (Beeley 2002: 5/AG 273). Leibniz emphasizes the fact that God cannot be perfectly conceived without the essences of things, even though, from a certain point of view (i.e., *qua* merely possible), they can be conceived without God. While the existence of things, on the other hand, cannot be conceived without God, one can conclude that the existence (or the essence) of God can be conceived without the existence of things (in other words, the double implication between God and the actual world that Leibniz maintained in the *Confessio* is now no longer accepted).

possible (not as actual)⁴². Here, however, what Leibniz is hinting at is exactly the conceivability of individuals at the level of mere possibility (or, if you prefer, the conceivability of existence not as actual but as merely possible).

I think that Leibniz's reference to (possible) causes of (possible) existing things has something to do with the causal structure of the *series rerum*, i.e., of a world conceived as possible (or, better still, conceived as making abstraction from both its actual existence as well as its actual non-existence). Leibniz originally thought of the actual world as a well-ordered series of things, where the order in question is a causal one (according to his commitment to causal determinism). The same causal structure, which was originally employed by Leibniz to characterize what actually exists, will later be extended to all the possible series as well. Leaving aside for the moment the problematic reference to something like "possible existence" (which Leibniz himself sometimes shows himself to perceive as disturbing), I think that his criticism of the conflation between causal and logical dependence is not in conflict with his own account.

6.8. The Theodicean Roots of Leibniz's Superessentialism

It seems rather natural to conclude that Leibniz's determinism – as well as his conception of the *series rerum* as something whose structure cannot be modified without producing an entirely different one – is the ground of Leibniz's (in) famous superessentialism, i.e., a view which involves the rejection of counterfactual identity. A point that has too often been neglected is that this view (superessentialism) is fundamentally related to Leibniz's approach to the problem of theodicy, and, in this sense, clearly came before the metaphysics of complete individual concepts rather than following from it as a consequence.

Leibniz's emphasis on the connection of things within a(ny) series of things, and the holistic intuition that grounds it, is clearly fundamental to his solution of the problem of evil. This clearly emerges from a draft concerning divine justice, probably written around 1695–97:

On the connection of things, in which it is shown that God, because of his most perfect wisdom, could not have established something with one singular act without establishing it concerning the whole series of the universe; from which it follows that God does not decree whether a man should sin or be punished, but rather if a [possible] man who will sin and will be punished (and the possible series of things in which he is contained) should be admitted into existence instead of another possible way the universe could have been (Grua 371).

42 Cf. Leibniz to De Volder, 6 July 1701: «the concept of a possible cause is required to conceive of its essence. and the concept of an actual cause is required to conceive of its existence» (A II 4: 25 or GP II 225/LDV 207); see also Leibniz to Bourguet, 1714: «Generally speaking, in order for a thing to be possible, it suffices that its efficient cause be possible; I except the supreme efficient cause [God], which must exist in fact» (GP III 225/L 661).

What Leibniz originally thought in terms of a “series of things” taken as whole, will now be transferred to the complete concept of an individual (which is nothing but a mirror of the world to which it belongs). The continuity between the two approaches on this point can be shown through a quick comparison of what Leibniz says in the *Confessio* concerning the sin of Adam and Eve with his later discussion of the case of Judas’ sin in the *Discourse on Metaphysics*.

In the *Confessio*, Leibniz writes the following:

In the same way [...] I parried the arguments of those who were indignant that God did not eliminate Adam and Eve from the world at once when they first sinned (so that their stain would not be propagated to their posterity) and that God did not substitute others better than they were. For I have drawn attention to the fact that if God had done that, sin having been taken away, an entirely different series of things, entirely different combinations of circumstances, persons, and marriages, and entirely different persons would have been produced and, consequently, sin having been taken away or extinguished, they themselves would not have existed. They therefore have no reason to be indignant that Adam and Eve sinned and, much less, that God permitted sin to occur, since they must rather credit their own existence to God’s tolerance of those very sins. (A VI 3: 148/CP 107)

Compare this passage with what Leibniz says in the *Discourse* about the causes of Judas’ sin. As Leibniz says, the right question is not why Judas sinned but, rather, why Judas-the-sinner (and not another individual) has been admitted to existence by God. The former question is pointless, because Judas’s sin is already part of his complete individual concept:

But someone else will say why is it that this man will assuredly commit this sin? The reply is easy: otherwise it would not be this man. For God sees from all the time that there will be a certain Judas whose notion or idea (which God has) contains this free and future action. Therefore, only this question remains, why does such a Judas, the traitor, who is merely possible in God’s idea, actually exist? But no reply to this question is to be expected on earth, excepted that, in general, one must say that, since God found it good that he should exist, despite the sin God foresaw, it must be that this sin is paid back with interest in the universe, [...] in sum, [that] the sequence of things in which the existence of that sinner is included is the most perfect among all the possible sequences (A VI 4: 1576–1577/AG 61).

It is clear, of course, that the main problem with this approach (which, as shown, finds its original basis in Leibniz’s original theodicy and will be included only later in his theory of complete individual concepts) is that, if it ascribes contingency to what actually exists, it does so by making existence the only contingent feature things can have⁴³.

43 «The possibility or the notion of a created mind, indeed, does not involve existence» (*De Natura Veritatis, Contingentiae et Indifferentiae*, ca. 1685–86, A VI 4: 1522). Of course, this would

So far, I have focused my attention on the relation of dependence obtaining between the *series rerum* taken as whole and its ultimate reason/cause, i.e., God, showing how the conflation between essential and existential requisites made it difficult for the young Leibniz to find a place for divine wisdom and its objective counterpart, possible worlds, in his account of the creation of the world. In the next chapter, I will focus on the internal structure of the *series rerum*, where the notion of “order” (spatiotemporal as well as a causal order) plays a fundamental role, especially for what concerns the fundamental thesis about the universal connection of all things. This idea about the universal connection of all things, moreover, constitutes a sort of ancestor of the notion of “compossibility”, i.e., the relation that orders possibles into a plurality of worlds.

As I will show, Leibniz will extend the idea of an ordered series of things even to the case of what is merely possible, concluding that connections obtain not only in the actual but also in every possible world. At the same time, however, it is interesting to note that the thesis that everything is connected in this (actual) world will be Leibniz’s primary argument against the pretence of attributing an absolute, independent (actual) existence to worlds different from the one we happen to inhabit.

go against the claim (stated by Leibniz in this very same paper, see 1515) that the conceptual containment theory of truth holds in the case of all propositions (necessary as well as contingent, universal as well as singular). Cf. also *De Libertate et Gratia*, ca. 1680-84, A VI 4:1457–1458, where Leibniz repeats that propositions having eternal truths have no existential import (*«non agitur de existentia»*) since they are only hypothetical.

Chapter 7. Leibniz on the Plurality of Worlds

According to Leibniz's favourite creation scenario, God does not create everything which is possible. According to Leibniz, indeed, the actual world is, in a sense, a privileged one, namely the one and only world which actually exists among an infinity of merely possible ones, i.e., barely possible ones – worlds that could have existed, or, from a theological point of view, worlds that God could have created in place of creating our world.

Since God's aim in creating a world is to maximize its perfection, and our world is the best possible one (to the effect that any change in it would make it a less perfect one), Leibniz concludes that God cannot but create this world instead of any other possible one. The point is that, even though all possible things are the objects of his understanding, God must make a choice in creating a world to actualize a certain group of possibles instead of others, because not all possible things are mutually compossible.

Incompossibility has to be regarded as the very reason why God could not have created all possible things; otherwise, if God could, but would not have done it, decision to create only a subset of all the possibles would have been an arbitrary choice. Therefore, the impossibility thesis, i.e., the claim that God cannot create everything possible, is the cornerstone of Leibniz's modal metaphysics: if the plurality of worlds is the ground for God's free choice, impossibility grounds the claim that, however free, God's choice is not an arbitrary one.

Even if his theological views commit him to a plurality of possible worlds¹, Leibniz is not a *modal realist*. According to him, indeed, the actual world and the many possible ones are not ontologically on a par. Unlike David Lewis, Leibniz does not claim that other worlds exist in the same ways as the actual world does. Even when claiming that there are infinitely many possible worlds, he carefully

1 I think that Leibniz's main reasons to introduce possible worlds were theological ones, or, more precisely, were reasons directly connected with his theodicy project. See, for instance, the notes on Arminians published in Grua, 340–341, where he claims that there is a possible world at which all men are saved and Adam's original sin is avoided, but it has not been created because «among an infinity of possible series, God, because of the nature of his wisdom, wanted to choose the most perfect one. [...] But the nature of possible things is so constituted that that series which contains a not-fallen Adam and all men saved is not the most perfect one; which I judge from what has happened (*ex eventu*), i.e., from the very same fact that it has not been chosen». See also Grua 342, one of the few occasions in which Leibniz describes in some detail how alternative possible worlds would look like: «[God] sees infinite possible series, every of which could constitute a whole universe. Among these, some will completely be without men; those which contain men are of different kinds, in some of them, indeed, men are affected by natural benefits and sufferings, whereas in others they are also waiting for supernatural goods and evils. There are possible series in which all men are damned, others in which they are all saved, and others in which part of them will be saved and part of them will be damned».

explains that «there is no reality in purely possibles than the reality they have in the divine understanding» (A II 2: 51/AG 75 or LA 49).

7.1. *Non nisi unum est genus Mundi*. Leibniz's Tantalizing Argument

In his seminal book on Leibniz, Benson Mates begins his exposition of the possible worlds theory moving from Leibniz's rejection of what we call the "principle of plenitude", that is the idea that all possibles must be realized in time, or, alternatively, that something is possible only if it is realized, will be realized or has been realized at some moment of time. Mates is specifically interested in understanding which reasons Leibniz provides for his claim that the actual world is just one of many possible worlds².

As Leibniz explicitly states, whoever accepts (an unrestricted version of) the principle of plenitude, is also forced to embrace a sort of universal necessitation (since there is no distinction between the possible and what is, was or will be actual). Conversely, whoever wants to avoid such a harsh conclusion, is compelled to embrace the idea that the actual world is nothing but one of the infinitely many possible ones God could have created: worlds that remain possible in themselves, even if they will never been actualized, according to the distinction between the logical and the temporal interpretation of modality. As Leibniz says in the late 1680s: «For if there are certain possibles that never exist, then the things that exist, at any rate, are not always necessary, for otherwise it would be impossible for others to exist in their place, and thus, everything that never exists would be impossible» (A VI 4: 1653/AG 94).

Among the reasons Leibniz offers to reject the realization of all possibilities, there is an argument which Mates regards as "tantalizing"; it can be found in one of those passages whose exact import is not clear, even if, he writes, «there is always a reason to believe that eventually a text will be found [...] that will provide an explanation» (Mates: 1986: 12).

The passage in question, taken from a paper written in December 1676, runs as follows:

There is only one kind of world, or, there are no entities besides bodies and minds, i.e., what we sense, nor are there any bodies except those which are at a certain distance from us. For if there were any, it could not be said whether they exist or do not exist now, which is contrary to the first principle. So, it follows that not all possibles exist. (A VI 3: 584/DSR 107)

The end of the passage makes clear that Leibniz's aim is to prove that not all possible things (actually) exist. The intriguing feature of this text, however, is that Leibniz clearly sees here that the latter task requires that one is able to

2 Cf. Mates (1986: 72).

show in advance that the world cannot but be unique («There is only one kind of world»), i.e., that there cannot be more than one actual world.

As Mates rightly observes, the passage suggests that there is some kind of connection between the measurement of space and that of time (in particular: simultaneity), i.e., the existence of something at some distance from us in space seems to be warranted by the fact that we are able to say if it exists now or not; from such a connection, moreover, he draws the consequence that non-actualized possible objects cannot be found at any distance from us³.

In this sense, the passage in question could be easily connected with other passages where Leibniz justifies the claim that not all possibles can be actualized by resorting to the idea that, otherwise, one could not imagine any fictional entity, like the main character of a novel, whose adventures are not situated “somewhere” in the spatiotemporal framework of our universe⁴.

In a text drafted around 1689, he notes:

One must certainly hold that not all possibles attain existence, otherwise one could imagine no novel that did not exist in some place and at some time. Indeed, it does not seem possible for all possible things to exist, since they get into one another's way (*quia se mutuo impediunt*). There are, in fact, an infinitely many series of possible things. Moreover, one series certainly cannot be contained within another, since each and every one of them is complete (*universalis*). (A VI 4: 1651/AG 29, transl. modified)

Speaking more precisely, Leibniz rejects the principle of plenitude only in its unrestricted form, rejecting the claim that, absolutely speaking, there are no possibilities that are never realized. On the other hand, however, he maintains that all (and only) the possible things that can be realized together must be realized in the very same world. Compossibility, then, seems to require a relative, world-indexed kind of plenitude. This follows from Leibniz's claim that each possible world is a maximal consistent set of mutually compossible things (or, better still, complete individual concepts). A suggestion in this direction comes from the last passage quoted above, where, from the completeness of each possible series, Leibniz draws the conclusion that one series cannot be contained within another (since possible worlds do not overlap)⁵.

3 Cf. Mates (196: 72fn).

4 «Nor can we really deny that many stories, especially those called novels, are thought to be possible, though they might find no place in this universal series God selected – unless one imagined that in such an expanse of space and time there are certain poetical regions, where you can see King Arthur of Great Britain, Amadis of Gaul, and the illustrious Dietrich von Bern of the German stories, all wandering through the world» (A VI 4: 1653–1654/AG 94).

5 Mates (1986: 77), has convincingly argued that compossibility has to be taken as an equivalence relation partitioning the totality of the possibles into possible worlds. On the difference between the Schoolmen's notion of “compossibility” and Leibniz's, see Mondadori (2003). Mates' interpretation has been questioned, especially for what concerns the maximality

One could say that, at least for what concerns our world, compossible things are all and only those that can be placed at some distance from us in space and time (or, better still, those which are spatially and temporally connected with something existing in that world⁶. From what we have said so far, it seems that it is because an entity (say, King Arthur) is not to be found somewhere in our spatiotemporal (and causal framework), that we can conclude that that entity is impossible with the actual world. However, this seems to hold only *a posteriori*, i.e., from the point of view of us who are in the actual world.

As Leibniz wrote to Bourguet in December 1714: «I do not agree that in order to know if the novel *Astrea* is possible, it is necessary to know its connection with the rest of the universe. It would indeed be necessary to know this if it is to be compossible with the universe» (GP VII 573/L 662).

In recent years, Donald Rutherford has emphasized the role that spatiotemporal connection plays as the main constraint that substantiates Leibniz's notion of impossibility. His reading moves from a relevant methodological shift: the notions of "world" and "being in the same world" have to be taken as primary from the explicative point of view. Accordingly, two or more substances would be compossible if and only if they belong to the same world (or God can conceive them as belonging to the same world)⁷.

Generally speaking, however, this notion of compossibility is silent about the plausibility (or implausibility) of a scenario in which God chooses to actualize a plurality of worlds which (1) actually exist and (2) are spatially and temporally disconnected from each other. After all, Leibniz himself seems to suggest something similar in passages like the following, taken from his first response to Bayle: «God could give to each substance its own phenomena independent of those of others, but in this way, he would have made as many worlds without connection, so to speak, as there are substances» (GP IV 519/L 493)⁸.

constraint; see, for instance, Cover–O'Leary Hawthorne (1999: 135). For a general discussion, see also Griffin (2013: 3–111). In what follows, I will provide a somewhat indirect defence of Mates' interpretation, by showing how Leibniz's notion of compossibility originates from an extension of the notion of "universal connection" to the case of merely possible worlds.

6 It seems, however, that the case can be extended to possible worlds too: «An imaginary possible participates in these grounds of order [viz., space and time are relational orders] as much as an actual thing, and it will be possible for a novel to be as well ordered with regard to places and times as a true history (*Le possible imaginaire participe autant que l'actuel de ces fondemens de l'ordre, et un Roman pourra estre aussi bien réglé, à l'égard des lieux et des temps, qu'une Histoire véritable*)» (Leibniz to Sophie, 1705, GP VII 564/LTS 338). When Bourguet writes (GP III 584) that time and instants concern only existing things, for example, Leibniz adds a remark between the lines of the letter: «*le temps regarde aussi les existences possibles*» (not printed in GP III; cf. LBr 103, Bl. 34v).

7 This is the position defended by Rutherford (1995: 187–188). This view has been further refined (and called "cosmological interpretation") in Messina–Rutherford (2009). A somewhat different version of the world-first view is provided by Wilson (2000).

8 The problem here is how strongly one has to take that "could" (in «God could give to each substance its own phenomena»), or, which is the same, to what extent Leibniz is really

The following suggestion may be proposed. Concerning two or more (possible) individuals, it makes sense to ask where they are located, i.e., which reciprocal relations of position are obtaining among them. The same, however, cannot be asked about possible worlds taken as wholes (or big individuals), at least unless one does not want to introduce relations of position obtaining between worlds themselves.

At the beginning of the *Theodicy*, for instance, Leibniz seems to frame the question exactly in these terms:

I call “world” the entire succession and the whole collection of all existent things, lest it be said that several worlds could have existed in different times and different places. For they must need to be reckoned together as one world or, if you will, one Universe. (GP VI 107/H 129, cf. also GP VI 440; GP II 362)

This definition of world is of the greatest interest, especially as it emphasizes «the entire *succession* and the whole collection of all existent things», i.e., the spatiotemporal order of the “series of things”. In this passage, Leibniz seems eager to rule out the very same possibility of talking of many worlds by resorting to a stipulation concerning the meaning of the term “world”. The latter, indeed, has to be taken as referring to the most inclusive, all-embracing collection of what exists. When talking of the world, and not of a world, then, we refer (or, at least, we should refer) to something which, by definition, cannot be pluralized; otherwise there could be something existent which would not be part of the world, against the hypothesis that the world is the most inclusive collection of existing things.

Following this definition, one could draw the conclusion that talking of a plurality of possible worlds is just misleading, because the concept of world is not susceptible to a plurality of instances. But it may be replied that this works only against a realist account of possible worlds: only for a modal realist are “possible worlds” worlds in the same sense as the actual world. Properly speaking, possible worlds are just ways in which the world could be (or could have been)⁹.

Leibniz’s claim in the passage from the *Theodicy* seems to amount to the thesis that “actuality” is a sort of *blanket term* (to quote an expression from David Lewis). In *On the Plurality of Worlds*, Lewis discusses an objection to his own modal realism that closely resembles Leibniz’s position. The objection runs as follows: the modal realist’s thesis, according to which there are many possible

committed to the world-apart hypothesis. The best analysis of this question has been proposed by Mondadori (1994a: 95–106). Cf. Adams (1994: 105): «Leibniz might conceivably be using a counterfactual conditional with an impossible antecedent, as a rhetorical device to express the mutual causal independence of created substances». The “could”, then, would be interpreted as a *per impossibile* hypothesis which does not pick out any real possible world. For a different reading, which rejects the idea that compossibility necessarily implies the rejection of the “world-apart” hypothesis, see for instance Cover–O’Leary Hawthorne (1999: 131–141).

9 Cf. Stalnaker (1976).

worlds, and ours is actual and all the other ones are unactualized, goes against the fact that «it is a matter of trivial meaning that whatever there is, is actual. The world “actual” is a blanket term, like “entity” or “exists”: it applies to everything» (Lewis 1986: 97).

The similarity with the position endorsed by Leibniz becomes stronger if one thinks that, for Lewis, “actual” has to be interpreted as an indexical term, which means just “this-worldly” (and it is employed to distinguish us and our world-mates from all the other worlds and the individuals that inhabit them). Thus, the objection can be reformulated by saying that «there can be only one world, because – as a trivial matter of meaning – “world” is a blanket term for the totality of everything». «If by definition», in other words, «“the world” comprises all there is, then to speak as I [Lewis] do of things that are out of this world is tantamount to speaking of things that are out of all there is – which is nonsense» (Lewis 1986: 99).

Lewis’ reply to this line of objection is simply that (strong) actualism is not an analytic claim at all, but rather a substantive thesis about what there is. In other words, the thesis that there are certain things which are not actual cannot be dismissed as merely contradictory or unintelligible. From the point of view of the strong actualist (someone for whom there is no difference at all between “to be”, “to exist”, and “to be actual”), the claim, in any case, that there are other worlds, spatiotemporally and causally isolate from our own world, can be reduced to the claim either that these worlds are parts of actuality (and, thus, cannot be disconnected but are parts of a single, all-embracing world) or that they are nothing at all¹⁰.

7.2. From the Worlds of Dreams to the Plurality of Worlds. Leibniz’s Reflections of April 1676

Having made a detour through the texts of the mature Leibniz, we return once more to the tantalizing argument discussed by Mates. Though written more than thirty years earlier than the *Theodicy*, the text from December 1676 seems to hint at the very same train of thought that runs through the later work: «There is only one kind of world, or, there are no entities besides bodies and minds, i.e., what we sense, nor are there bodies except those which are at a certain distance from us». An element that has not been emphasized by Mates

10 In the *Theodicy*, as well as elsewhere, Leibniz plainly accepts the idea that «there is an infinite number of globes, as great or greater than ours, which have as much right as ours to hold rational inhabitants, though it follows not at all that they are human» (§19, GP VI 114/H 137). That there may be planets, inhabited by other rational beings, no matter how far from us, does not mean that they constitute another world (according to the definition of “world” given above). In the *New Essays*, Leibniz refers to the doctrine of the plurality of universes as formulated by Huygens in his *Cosmotheoros* (1698) and by Fontenelle in his *Entretiens sur la Pluralité des Mondes* (1686), cf. A VI 6: 314 and 472.

is the strong phenomenalist strand that emerges from this passage. As shown in Chapter 5 above, a strong phenomenalist perspective is the common feature of a whole series of texts written by Leibniz at the end of his Paris period (from the end of 1675 to the end of 1676).

Mates does not take into consideration, moreover, the structure of Leibniz's argument, in particular his choice to use a *reductio ad absurdum*: if there were things which cannot be situated at a certain distance from us, then «it could not be said whether they exist or do not exist now, *which is contrary to the first principle*» (italics mine). The “first principle” in question has been clearly stated by Leibniz himself in the first sentence of the same paper: «Nothing is and is not at the same time, or anything either is or is not» (A VI 3: 584/DSR 107).

Finally, another interesting element is that the very same “tantalizing argument” has been formulated by Leibniz in *De Modo Distinguendi Phaenomena Realia ab Imaginariis*, where he uses it to prove the mutual connection of all the existing things in the world:

That all existing things have this intercourse (*commercium*) with each other can be proved [...] from the fact that otherwise no one could say whether anything is taking place in existence now or not, so that there would be no truth or falsehood for such a proposition, which is absurd (A VI 4: 1503/L 365).

Note that the claim that “all existing things are reciprocally interrelated” is what allows Leibniz to say that, even though «there is nothing to prevent innumerable other minds from existing as well as ours», nonetheless not all possible minds do actually exist. In this passage, then, Leibniz maintains that the universal connection of all things has to be accepted because its rejection (which is compatible with the possibility of there being something which exists and is not connected with anything existing in our world) would lead to a violation of the principle of bivalence: «so that there would be no truth or falsehood for such a proposition, which is absurd».

There is also another relevant aspect of this story which has not been adequately discussed by the interpreters. I am thinking of the fact that, in the two passages quoted above as well as in others, Leibniz uses his argument to undermine the idea that all possible things exist. This very same argument, however, had already been used by the young Leibniz in the Paris notes to support the view that a plurality of existing worlds constituted a real possibility. The interesting (and even puzzling) aspect of this story is that a sort of *Gestalt* shift occurred in the mind of Leibniz (from April 1676 to the end of the very same year), to the effect that the same argument that originally appeared to him as evidence in favour of the real possibility of a plurality of worlds is now regarded by him as the best proof against that hypothesis.

In Chapter 5, I discussed the following equivalence proposed by Leibniz in his Mainz period:

Whatever is sensed exists. Indemonstrable.

Whatever exists is sensed. To be demonstrated. (A VI 2: 282)

The second part of this equivalence is not straightforward, and this is why Leibniz notes that a demonstration is required. This claim, however, is much more difficult to defend than the first one, since it seems to challenge the strength of Leibniz's phenomenalism itself. It seems to me that Leibniz's strategy is as follows. Instead of providing a direct demonstration that "if something exists, it is clearly and distinctly perceivable", he will resort to an attempt to prove the truth of the contrapositive of the former proposition, namely "if something *cannot* be clearly and distinctly perceived, it does *not* exist". The claim that "all existing things are reciprocally connected", then, will play a fundamental role in Leibniz's attempt to complete his proof.

What happens, however, if one assumes (just as a working hypothesis) that the proposition at stake is false? What if one accepts that whatever is sensed exists but rejects its converse, assuming that there can be existing things that, nonetheless, are not accessible to our perceptions? Such an alternative hypothesis emerges from a series of notes written in April 1676. The context is that of Leibniz's working out of the "dream argument" which aims to prove that the lawlike character of our perceptions is sufficient (at least from a practical point of view) to prove the existence of the external world.

Let me quote once again a passage already cited above (Chapter 5):

it is not necessary that a dream differs from waking experience by some intrinsic reality (*realitate differre quadam intrinseca*), but it is only necessary that they differ in form or in the order of the sensations (*forma sive ordine sensationum*). Therefore, there is no reason why we should ask whether there exist certain bodies outside us, or whether space exists, and other things of this sort [...]. Unless, that is, we say that we call a "body" whatever is perceived in a consistent way, and say that "space" is that which brings it about that several perceptions cohere with each other at the same time – so that if, by a journey which is so long, I arrive at a certain place, and by a journey of another length at another place, and by a third journey at a third place, and again from one of these to another, then from these I will infer how long it will take me to arrive, from one of the remaining places, at another of the remaining places, from the assumption of the unity of space. Therefore, the idea of space is recognised by this: namely, that it is that by which we separate the place and, as it were, the world of dreams from our own. (15 April 1676, A VI 3: 511/DSR 63–65)

First, Leibniz characterizes space as «that which brings about that several perceptions cohere with each other at the same time»¹¹. He then adds that space «is that by which we separate [...] the world of dreams from our own». These two characterizations of space do not seem to be equivalent, at least *prima facie*. Leibniz establishes from the beginning a criterion whereby one can distinguish between dreams and reality. Soon, however, this very same criterion turns into a condition for conceiving two or more substances as being part of the same world (they must be ordered into a such-and-such series of things). Moreover, he passes from talking about dreams and reality, in general terms, to talking about the distinction between our world and the world(s) of dream.

In order to understand the transition from talking of dreams to talking of dream-worlds, we should pay attention to the connection between Leibniz's two characterizations of space. Between them, Leibniz has inserted an interesting example:

if, by a journey which is so long, I arrive at a certain place and by a journey of another length at another place, and by a third journey at a third place, then from these I can infer how long it will take me to arrive, from one of the remaining places, at another of the remaining places, from the assumption of the unity of space.

By “unity of space”, I assume, Leibniz means spatial connection, in the way, for example, it has been defined by Anthony Quinton: «Two things are in the same space if they are spatially connected, if there is a route connecting them, if each lies at some definite distance and in some definite direction from the other» (Quinton 1952: 130). Spatial connection only says that if two things, *a* and *b*, are spatially connected, then everything spatially connected with *a* is also spatially connected with *b*, and vice versa.

If I am not mistaken, Leibniz's aim is to show that those relations which allow us to discriminate dreams from reality, are spatial and temporal relations. This means that for a body to be an object of “consistent perceptions” is to bear a determinate spatial (and temporal) relation with us (or with something simultaneous with us). It is true that Leibniz does not mention time in the passage I am discussing now, but I think that this can be explained by the fact that he is just focusing on the case of simultaneous perceptions. Now, what is required for different minds to share something like a “common world”, is the particular harmony that allows one to connect each perception with every other one. Thus, for all the minds to represent the same world, they have to share at least the same spatiotemporal framework. And, whereas the unity of the world depends on the unity of space, the unity of space consists in the possibility of having coherent perceptions. Therefore, the unity of the world requires the unity of space, and the unity of space requires coherence or harmony among the perceptions of

¹¹ On the notion of simultaneity, see especially Arthur (2021: 22–46).

different minds. Finally, since the harmony among those perceptions is the criterion for distinguishing real from imaginary phenomena, it follows that space, as the system of all the relations of distance among bodies, is the dividing line between our world (which we call “real”) and the world(s) of dream.

At the beginning, the distinction between real phenomena and dreams was essentially thought of as one between an ordered series of perception vs. disordered ones: real phenomena are part of an ordered series of things, while dreams are not. Now, however, Leibniz is clearly discussing a distinction between worlds, even though the term “world” for a dream-world is introduced with some caution («*somniorum locorum et velut Mundum*»). Discussing the worlds of dreams as worlds means discussing them as other series of things, and, thus, it means to challenge the presupposition that there can only be one spatio-temporal framework.

The latter point is clearly emphasized by Leibniz in another passage from the same April 1676 series of texts, where he writes: «Anyone who asks if there can be another world, or another space, is simply asking if there are other minds which have no communication with ours» (A VI 3: 512/DSR 65). Since space has been characterized in terms of the consistency of our perceptions, the hypothesis of something like a world of dreams (spatially disconnected from our own) brings with itself the idea of non-harmonizing perceiving minds (or “alien minds”, as I will call them in what follows). Then if there can exist two (or more) minds whose perceptions are not reciprocally consistent, they would also lack spatial connection. Consequently, they would live in different worlds¹².

Elsewhere in the April 1676 series of texts, Leibniz writes the following lines:

From this it follows that infinitely many other spaces and other worlds can exist, in such a way that between these and ours there will be no distance, if there exist certain minds to which other things appear which are in no respect consistent with ours. Further, just as the world and space of dreams differ from ours, so there could be different laws of motion in that other world. From this is evident that so far is it from being the case that material things are more real than others, but that on the contrary one can always doubt of their existence; or, rather, they do not differ materially, i.e., in their existence in themselves, from the existence of dreams [...]. (A VI 3: 512/DSR 65)

Notice that the claim that «infinitely many other spaces and other worlds can exist» is said to follow from “this”, i.e., from what Leibniz said in the line immediately preceding the passage quoted: «it does not follow that there exists anything but sensation, and the cause of sensation and of its consistency», which is just Leibniz’s phenomenalist claim plus the idea of God as the external cause of the harmony between the perceptions of different minds.

12 Resorting to dreams to question the unity of space and time may seem bizarre to us at first, but notice that the same strategy will be followed by F. H. Bradley, *Appearance and Reality* (1893), see Bradley (1916: 211).

The point here is very intriguing, since Leibniz will always maintain that natural laws are contingent ones, i.e., different laws hold in other possible worlds. Here, however, the contingency of natural laws is immediately interpreted in terms of different laws holding at other (existent) worlds. There are other passages in the Paris notes where Leibniz couples the possibility of other spaces (and worlds) with the possibility of other laws¹³.

The idea of a plurality of worlds with different laws of motion, however, will be brought back to the fore in April 1676 and connected with the idea of the derivation of all things from God's attributes: «hence it comes about that the same essence of God is expressed in any genus of the world in its totality, and so God manifests himself in infinitely many ways»¹⁴. Finally, the same claim concerning the natural laws is repeated in another text, where something very interesting is added to what he has already said elsewhere:

For example, if it is a law in our world that the same quantity of motion is always preserved, there can be another universe in which there are also other laws. But it is necessary that the latter space differs from the former; there will be position of some kind, and multitude, but it will not be necessary that there should be length, breadth and depth (A VI 3: 522/DSR 83).

To the best of my knowledge, this is the only passage where Leibniz affirms that the space of another world has to share some general features which are common to all kinds of worlds (he mentions *positio* and *multitudo*), but does not necessarily preserve the three dimensions which are peculiar of our own space¹⁵. This claim, moreover, will be harshly rejected by the mature Leibniz¹⁶.

7.3. Indexicality and Actuality: An Egalitarian Temptation?

The passages I have listed show that, at least for a while, Leibniz adopted the plurality of worlds as a serious “working hypothesis” in his metaphysical speculations. Of course, from what we have already seen, this hypothesis seems to represent the most proximate ancestor of Leibniz's mature theory of possible worlds. The most striking difference, however, is that in the Paris notes Leibniz seems to be committed to the actual existence of other worlds, or, better, to the claim that the other worlds are ontologically on a par with our own. This

13 Cf. another passage from the same text: A VI 3: 513/DSR 67; cf. A VI 3: 467/LoC 31.

14 *De Formis seu de Attributis Dei*, April 1676, A VI 3: 514/DSR 71. Commenting this passage, Adams (1994: 128) maintains that Leibniz's reference to «any genus of world (*in quolibet Mundi genere*)» should presumably be taken as a reference to possible worlds. I disagree with him on this point.

15 See the discussion on this point between Rescher and Belaval: Rescher (1977); Belaval (1978).

16 In the *Theodicy*, §351, GP VI 322–323, Leibniz categorically affirms that space having only three dimensions does not depend on God's choice of the world, but it is a matter of “geometrical necessity”, which means an absolute one. See Debuiche–Rabouin (2019).

constituted the really “deviant” feature of this theory with respect to Leibniz’s account of possible worlds.

From the historical point of view, it has already been pointed out that Leibniz’s many spaces (and many worlds) view is very similar to Tschirnhaus’ reading of Spinoza’s doctrine of the infinitely many attributes of God in terms of a plurality of worlds¹⁷. As a matter of fact, an echo of these thoughts by Tschirnhaus can be found in Leibniz’s reflections in the Paris notes of the period 1675–76¹⁸.

What is peculiar to Leibniz’s hypothesis is the fact of being the first account (at least, to the best of my knowledge) in which many worlds are conceived as mutually isolated and each closed under spatial and temporal relations. This move allows him to say that the idea of a plurality of worlds as “simultaneously existing” makes no sense at all, given the impossibility of any spatiotemporal cross-worlds relation. Notice that this very same point, the impossibility of establishing relations of simultaneity or temporal priority/posteriority between events located in different worlds, will also be the main reason which will lead Leibniz (at the end of 1676) to regard those worlds not as really existing ones but as merely possible ones, i.e., as alternative version of the only actual world.

What Leibniz says in the passage quoted above («it is so evident that so far is it the case that material things are more real than others [...] they do not differ materially, i.e., in their existence in themselves, from the existence of dreams [...]») may appear similar to an egalitarian view, like Lewis’ indexical theory of actuality¹⁹.

Commenting on this passage, Castañeda correctly observes that «Leibniz is contrasting degrees of reality, and existence or actuality is definitely included [among them]. Now Leibniz is categorically saying that each of the perceptual contents that occur in a dream is just as actual as the content of the most veridical perception» (Castañeda 1978: 125). Accordingly, he concludes that the things in our world are not more real than those in the world of dreams as far as their existence in themselves is concerned. In my opinion, “existence in itself” should here be contrasted with “existence with respect to us”. This conclusion, moreover, seems to allude to something like the indexical theory of actuality, on the basis of which Lewis can grant a distinction between “existence” and “actuality”.²⁰

17 Cf. Kulstad (1999). See also Kulstad (2001). But see already Piro (1990: 220–221).

18 Cf. Leibniz’s 1675 report of his conversation with Tschirnhaus concerning Spinoza’s *Ethics*: «He [Spinoza] believes that there are infinitely many other positive attributes in addition to thought and extension, but that thought is present in all things as extension is present here; however, it is impossible for us to conceive of what sort they could be, and everyone is infinite in its own genus, as in the case of space here» (A VI 3: 385).

19 See Lewis (1983: 10–25); (1986:92–96). For a criticism of Lewis, see van Inwagen (1980).

20 Robert Adams has observed that sometimes Leibniz expresses his view in terms that could recall the indexical theory of actuality. He refers to *De Propositionibus Existentialibus*, ca.1688 A VI 4: 1632, where he claims that the adjective “existent” means “this series of things posited”, where, Adams notes, the emphasis has to be put on *this* («posita semel hac rerum serie et hoc semper notat τὸ existens»). See Adams (1974). Cf. also Adams (2021: 10–19).

Of course, unlike David Lewis, the young Leibniz has derived his theory of a plurality of worlds from a phenomenalist account of perception, and not from considerations on the meaning of modal operators. In the case of Lewis, the relativity of actuality is mainly a question of linguistic meaning (assuming that “actual” is the same as “this-worldly”, it trivially follows that our world is actual and the others are not)²¹. In the case of Leibniz, by contrast, the relativity of actuality seems to be grounded in his theory of perception, whereby the subject of perception (the Cartesian *cogito*) has a cognitive access to everything which exists in his same world (even though his knowledge is for the most part a confused one), whereas he has no cognitive access to what is not actual (he can think of a non-actual thing, but he cannot perceive it; this is exactly the sense of the distinction between *concipere* and *percipere*)²².

All things considered, however, I think that Leibniz never fully embraced something like the indexical theory of actuality. The passage I have quoted above, where he comes closer to such a view, does not state exactly the same doctrine as Lewis’s indexical theory:

From this it is evident that so far is it from being the case that material things are more real than others, but that on the contrary one can always doubt of their *existence*; or, rather, they do not differ materially, i.e., in their existence in themselves, from the existence of dreams, even though they differ in *beauty* (A VI 3: 512/DSR 65, italics mine).

What Leibniz is saying here is that, even though (the worlds of) dream and (the world of) waking experience do not differ as far as their existence in themselves is concerned, they differ “in beauty”. “Existence” in this passage is paired with “matter”, while “beauty” is paired with “form”. So what, then, does this mean, this claim that the waking world and the world of dreams differ in beauty? Reference to beauty is prominent in Leibniz’s account of the world, of course, especially when the choice of the world is related to the wisdom of God²³. As formulated in the passage above, however, I suspect that the distinction between existence and beauty can be somehow related to Leibniz’s

21 Cf. D. Lewis (2001: 84). Lewis says that his doctrine of actuality mirrors his, less controversial, theory of time. In this case also, there are Leibnizian passages that seem to go in the same direction as Lewis. Cf. A VI 4: 412: «*Now*, that is, at this point in time (Nunc *id est in hoc temporis puncto*)»; A VI 4: 1517: « For “now” or “here” can be understood only in relation to other things (*neque enim tò nunc vel hic nisi relatione ad caetera intelligi potest*)».

22 As Di Bella (2016: 29) notes, the relativization of actuality seems to be even more plausible when it is referred, as in Leibniz, to a phenomenally-minded scenario, than when it is referred just to our linguistic practice. In a sense, whilst Lewis started with the plurality of worlds and derived the indexical theory of actuality as a consequence, Leibniz went the other way round: from the impossibility of an absolute criterion of distinction between this world and the dream-worlds, to the impossibility of rejecting the existence of the latter, and, finally, to the plurality thesis.

23 Cf. *De Libertate, Fato, Gratia Dei*, ca. 1686–87, A VI 4:1604–1605.

distinction between an *a priori* and an *a posteriori* account of existence, a topic I have already discussed in the previous chapters. According to the *a posteriori* point of view, existence can be conceived as relative matter, whereas, according to the *a priori* one, it should probably be assumed as an absolute feature possessed by one and only one world (the actual one).

The absolute character of actuality is required in order to conclude that, for every possible world, there is one and only one that God has actualized, and it is the best one. “Being the best” is, of course, a comparative notion, but not a relative one, at least not in the sense in which the indexical notion of actuality is relative (in this sense, note that *relational* does not mean *relative*, at least not in the sense in which, according to the indexical theory, actuality is a world-relative property).

In a text of 1686, Leibniz will try to formulate an exhaustive definition of existence, one in which both epistemic and ontological considerations can be merged together. In section 73 of the *Generales Inquisitiones*, one can read:

I say [...] that an existing being is that which is compatible with the most things, i.e., a most possible being. Thus, all coexistent things are equally possible [here “possible” means “compossible”]. Or, what comes to the same thing, that existent is what pleases one who is intelligent and powerful, but in this way, it is presupposed that such a one exists. However, this definition at least can be given: that is existent which would please some mind and would not displease another more powerful mind, if minds of any kind were assumed to exist. Thus, it comes to this: something is said to exist that does not displease the most powerful mind, if it should be assumed that such a most powerful mind exists. But in order for this definition to be applicable to experience, we must rather give the following definition: there *exists* that which pleases some (existent) mind [...], and does not (absolutely) displease the most powerful mind. (A VI 4: 763/GI 85; transl. mod.)

According to what Leibniz says in the last line of the quoted text, the transition from a relative to an absolute account of existence corresponds to the transition from the compatibility or harmony among finite minds, whose perspectives are always partial, to the compatibility or harmony with the divine mind. The latter is an account based on the notion of perfection or degrees of perfection²⁴, whilst the former is based on the (distinct or confused) nature of perception. In a sense, the two accounts must be equivalent (especially when perception is ascribed to God as well), but the important point here is that such an equivalence cannot be proved.

24 See A VI 4: 1363–1364, where Leibniz initially distinguishes between “quantity of reality” (or “essence”) and “quantity of possibility”, but he acknowledges that these two ultimately amount to the same thing. The best account of Leibniz’s theory of “perfection” is that of Heinekamp (1969: 135ff).

As Leibniz writes to Foucher in 1675:

Now, since a reality passed for a vision, what prevents a vision from passing for a reality? It is true that the more we see some connection in what happens to us, the more we are confirmed in the opinion we have about the reality of our appearances; and it is also true that the more we examine our appearances closely, the more we find them well-sequenced [...]. This constant accord engenders great assurance, but after all, it will only be moral assurance until somebody discovers the *a priori* origin of the world we see and pursues the question as to why things are the way they appear back to the ground of essence (*dans le fonds de l'essence*). For having done that, he will have demonstrated that what appears to us is a reality and that it is impossible that we ever be deceived about it again. But I believe that this would nearly approach the beatific vision and that it is difficult to aspire to this in our present state. (A II 1²: 391/AG 4)

Notice that the possibility of establishing *a priori* the metaphysical derivation of this world from “the ground of essence” is considered as equivalent to attaining the so-called “beatific vision” (*visio beatifica*), as sort of immediate acquaintance with the essence of God (a knowledge of him “face to face”), which the theological tradition granted only to the blessed²⁵.

According to the *a priori* account of existence in terms of perfection, I will try to argue that the fact that an individual *i* exists must be, if not explained, then at least understood in terms of *i*'s being part of the best possible world, where the term “best possible world” must be taken as something like a *descriptive content*, i.e., explicated in terms of the perfection/degree of reality of the essences which, collectively, constitute that particular world. According to the perception-based account, on the other hand, the actuality of *i* must be characterized in terms of *i*'s being consistent with this well-connected series of things, and, then, to this entire phenomenal world; where, notice, the latter is always characterized through an unmistakable and irreducible indexical element: this world, the world we happen to live in, and so on. An indexical element, then, is essentially connected to what for Leibniz is the reference to actuality from the point of view of a finite or created understanding (especially for what concerns the possibility that we have of individuating an object by means of its position in the spatiotemporal framework of our series of things)²⁶.

25 Cf. Leibniz's *Systema Theologicum* (1686): «when our cognition will be distinct, we will be able to drink at the source of things and have an intuition of God face to face. For, as God is the ultimate reason of things, for this very same reason we will certainly see God when our cognition will be *a priori*, i.e., through the cause of causes, inasmuch as our demonstrations will require neither hypotheses nor experiments, and we will be able to provide a reason even to primitive truths» (A VI 4: 2452).

26 Again, this indexical element in the characterization of actuality is due to the fact that we (as cognitive subjects) are part of what is actual, i.e., that the point of view on actuality is, so to say, a situated one, or one internal to the actual world itself. Now, moving from a situated

7.4. Leibniz's Argument Against the Plurality of Worlds

We must now examine more closely the argument Leibniz advanced against the plurality of existing worlds. Let me quote the most important passages in which such an argument occurs (following a chronological order):

[1] There is no need for the multitude of things to be increased by a plurality of worlds; for there is no number of things which is not in this one world, and indeed in any part of it. To introduce another genus of existing things, and, as it were, another world which is also infinite, is to abuse the name of existence; for it cannot be said whether those things exist now or not. But existence, as it is conceived by us, involves a certain determinate time; or, we say that that thing exists of which it can be said at some certain moment of time, "That thing now exists". (Dec. 12, 1676, A VI 3: 581/DSR 103-105)

[2] Nothing is and is not at the same time, or anything either is or is not. [...] There is only one kind of world, or, there are no entities besides bodies and minds, i.e., what we sense, nor are there any bodies except those which are at a certain distance from us. For if there were any, it could not be said whether they exist or do not exist now, which is contrary to the first principle. So it follows that not all possibles exist. (Dec. 12, 1676, A VI 3: 584/DSR 107)

[3] It can be demonstrated that not everything possible takes place, at least in this series of things, i.e., in this space or this world. For if we imagine that another state [of the world], different from that which actually follows, will follow from the preceding state, then there will appear also different forms of things from those which, however, will never actually appear unless someone does not want to say that they appear in another universe, or, that there are as many universes as there are possible ways of imagining it. A demonstration should be required against the idea of a plurality of infinite spaces and universes, because it seems that there cannot exist any two things which are not reciprocally connected. [...] If there existed another series outside of ours, then it would not be possible to say whether something in it existed which is simultaneous with [something in] ours or not. Which is impossible. For necessarily it does exist or not. This is a wonderful argument. (ca. 1677, A VI 4: 1349–1350)

[4] [T]here is nothing to prevent innumerable other minds from existing as well as ours, although not all possible minds exist. This I demonstrate from the fact that all existent things are interrelated. However, minds of another nature than ours can be conceived which are also [not] interrelated with ours here. That all existing things have this intercourse can be proved [...] from the fact that otherwise no one could say whether anything is taking place in existence now or not, so that there would be no truth or falsehood for such a proposition, which is absurd. (ca. 1683–85, A VI 4: 1503/L 365)

account of what is actual (in the sense just explained), the only plausible characterization of existence we can give is a causal one: objects which actually exist are those and only those which can stand in a certain causal relation with us.

Text 4, as I have already noted at the beginning, presents striking similarities with the train of thought Leibniz entertained in the passages from April 1676. But the conclusion here is completely different: even if alien minds are conceivable, they must be extruded from existence because of the universal connection of all things, a point which comes back also in text 3 («because it seems that there cannot exist two things which are not reciprocally connected»). What has changed is that now the principle of interconnection serves to strengthen Leibniz's impossibility thesis, and, thus, to distinguish that particular group of possibles that has been actualized from all the others that remain at the level of mere possibility.

Passages 1-4 present slightly different versions of the same argument. The main target is the idea that there could be another genus or another kind of world, or, which is the same, that "world" is a concept that might have more than one instance. This is clearly stated in both texts 1 and 2.

Text 1 seems to oscillate between the view that a plurality of worlds is just an unnecessary hypothesis, one which must be rejected by resorting to God's infinite wisdom, and the stronger claim, discussed at length in the second part of text 1 as well as in text 2, that a plurality of worlds is an impossible hypothesis, one whose assumption would lead to a contradiction. The former hypothesis will feature once again in the late *Causa Dei*, section 15: «There is no question of there being more than one actual world, because our single universe includes the whole totality of creatures of every place and time, and in this sense the term "world" will be employed here» (GP VI 440).

The contrast between the impossibility and the non-necessity of the plurality of worlds mirrors the well-known contrast between those who maintain that compossibility is a necessary feature of any world vs. those who maintain it is only a contingent one. In both cases, however, I think this opposition has been taken too far, as emerges, indeed, from the last of the four passages quoted above. The argument is the same as we have already read in the *Theodicy*, and Leibniz's conclusion is that the concept of world is that of an all-embracing totality of all existent things (everywhere in space and time). Accordingly, as Leibniz says in text 1, to «introduce another genus of existing things, and, as it were, another world [...] is to abuse the name of existence».

The main focus of Leibniz's argument seems to be the unity of time, and, especially, the necessity that time be unified, which would guarantee that the world has to be necessarily one as well. In order to do so, he aims to show that there cannot be existing things which are not temporally connected with any other thing existing in our world. Thus, Leibniz's argument is a *reductio ad absurdum* moving from the hypothesis that there is at least one thing that exists outside the series of things that make up our world – "outside" here must not, of course, be taken in a spatial sense.

Reflecting on the unity of time, it seems that Leibniz ultimately realized that his original hypothesis on the plurality of worlds, which moved from considerations concerning the fact that different worlds could be spatially unrelated (there is no distance obtaining between them), would fall short when coming to the possibility of two (or more) temporally unrelated worlds.

From the hypothesis of alien minds (whose perceptions are not harmonized with ours), it followed, in other words, that different spaces and worlds could exist «in such a way that between these and ours there will be no distance»; this, at least, was Leibniz's position in April 1676. Now, to the contrary, this hypothesis seems to crash against the idea that temporally disconnected worlds could not exist, «for if there were any [minds and bodies at no distance from us], it could not be said whether they exist or do not exist now, which is contrary to the first principle» (as stated at the beginning of text 2).

In its formal version, however, the argument seems to be question begging. It seems to assume the very same principle (the unity of time) which it is supposed to prove. As Leibniz puts it in text 1, indeed: «we say that that thing exists of which it can be said at some certain moment of time, “That thing now exists”». Again, one can take this either as a stipulation about the meaning of existence (or the meaning of “world”, as in the *Theodicy*) or one has to acknowledge that there is something wrong here. For the fact that we can say now that something exists in a world *u* (different from our world *w*) does not allow us to conclude that there is something at *u* that exists *now*, unless we take “now” as a rigidifying expression (as a rigid designator, we would say); as much as the fact that we can say in the actual world *w* that something *actually* exists at *u* does not allow us to conclude that something in *u* exists in the actual world (again: unless one takes “actually” as a rigid designator)²⁷.

7.5. Verificationism or Realism about Truth?

In order to properly understand Leibniz's argument, one has to clarify that when he says (in text 3): «if there existed another series outside of ours, then it would not be possible to say whether something in it existed which is simultaneous with ours or not», the latter clause has to be explained as follows: it would be impossible to say if something existing in a different world is simultaneous with us (or with something simultaneous with us in the actual world) or is temporally prior or posterior to us (or to something simultaneous with us in the actual world). Something existing in another world would not be simultaneous or temporally prior/posterior to anything in the actual world, and, thus, it would be impossible to say whether it exists or not.

²⁷ The ambiguity between the rigid and non-rigid reading of “actual” (and “now”) has been clearly pointed out by David Lewis: see Lewis (1983: 18–20, and the Postscript at 22), and also Lewis (1986: 94).

In other words, passages like text 3 suggest a reading of Leibniz's argument based on something like the principle of verification. On this view, asserting that something exists in another series (temporally unrelated to our series) is simply meaningless, because all the events that we can perceive must take place either now or at an instant of time temporally connected with the present one. For the only way we have of verifying that something exists is that of showing that it is spatially connected with us (if simultaneous), or that it is connected with us by means of a temporal chain (if not simultaneous)²⁸.

Leibniz's commitment to the principle of verification is clearly stated in many texts in which he repeats that all those things which cannot be perceived by anyone (any mind whatsoever), are nothing. This is the point of what he calls his "Herculean argument" to prove that bodies are not substances but only coherent (i.e., harmonious) appearances:

But if we say only this, that bodies are coherent appearances, this puts an end to all inquiry about the infinitely small, which cannot be perceived. But this is also a good place for that Herculean argument of mine, that all those things which are such that it is impossible for anyone to perceive whether they exist or not, are nothing. (*Corpus non est Substantia*, A VI 4: 1637/LoC 261)²⁹

A similar principle was already stated by Leibniz in his *Preface to Nizolius*, where he formulates a set of rules that ground our empirical knowledge (which cannot rest only on empirical induction). The second of these rules says: The existence of a thing which is not perceived, should not be presumed"; and the third stipulates that: «Whatever is not presumed, has to be regarded as nothing

28 The same point has been raised by Swinburne (1981: 165–166): «if an observer observes an event, the occurrence of the event must [...] be simultaneous with or prior to the observation of it [...]. Hence all events about which at a given instant an observer has knowledge occur at instants connected with the present instant by a temporal chain [...]. Hence the claim that there were events not temporally related to each other could have no evidence produced in its favour. For evidence would be evidence about events at other instants and the only ways in which we could learn about those events would be ways which presuppose that the events are temporally related to the event of learning about them». This text is also quoted by Futch (2008: 70–71), who defends the verificationist reading.

29 The editors of the Academy date this piece to around 1689–90; Richard Arthur, by contrast, suggests an earlier date, around 1678–79. Concerning the Herculean argument, Arthur labels it the *principle of non-existence of imperceptibles* (PNI), and correctly observes that, when applied to the specific case of (qualitative) differences, we obtain the principle of the identity of indiscernibles (PII) as a special case; cf. Arthur's remark in LoC 384, note 2. Arthur correctly refers here to the first occurrence of the principle of non-existence of indiscernibles in Leibniz's *De Materia Prima*, ca. 1670–71, A VI 2: 280, where he states that «whatever is not sensed is nothing», from which the consequence follows that “if prime matter will move in one direction, that is in parallel lines, it would be at rest, and, accordingly, it would be nothing”. The same conclusion is presented in *Propositiones quaedam physicae*, ca.1672–76, A VI 3: 56. On the genesis of PII from a phenomenological approach based on a verificationist claim, see the texts discussed in Di Bella (2005a: 161–164).

from the pragmatic point of view (*in praxi habendum pro nullo*), unless it has been proved» (A VI 2: 431). The conjunction of these two rules together corresponds to the Herculean argument as formulated in the passage just quoted above. The presumption against the existence of what cannot be proved (or verified), thus, plays a prominent role in Leibniz's rejection of the reality of other worlds.

This version of the argument, however, seems to fall short for another reason. Assume the principle that all the things that cannot be perceived by anyone are nothing. Should we include God among the perceivers or not? In a sense, we should, because there are many passages in which Leibniz clearly states that God is the first perceiving being. From among the Paris notes, one can quote the following passage: «Without sentient beings, nothing would exist. Without one primary sentient being, which is the same as the cause of all things, nothing would be sensed» (A VI 3: 588/DSR 113; see also A VI 3: 56).

If we include God among the perceivers, however, it is difficult to see why perceiving two or more separate series of things should be impossible for God. On the other hand, what Leibniz says in text 2, i.e., that «existence, as it is conceived by us, involves a certain determinate time», seems to speak against the inclusion of God among the perceivers to whom Leibniz's verificationist argument can be applied. If the latter is the case, however, Leibniz's argument can easily be criticized because it moves from an epistemic premise to an ontological conclusion.

There is another aspect of Leibniz's argument that needs to be emphasized, however. In texts 1-4 above, the verificationist approach is clearly paired with another strategy which finds its ultimate ground in the primacy of the principle of bivalence. Generally speaking, Leibniz states that if there were something "placed" at no distance from us in space and time, then it would be impossible to say if such a thing exists or not. In text 2, Leibniz says «if there were any, it could not be said whether they exist or do not exist now, which is contrary to the first principle», where the first principle is «Nothing is and is not at the same time, or anything either is or is not», where he seems to state both the principle of non-contradiction and the law of the excluded middle.

In text 4, the existence of alien minds is rejected because «otherwise no one could say whether anything is taking place in existence now or not, so that there would be no truth or falsehood for such a proposition, which is absurd [...]», where the proposition mentioned is any of the form "*m* exists" where *m* is an alien mind. According to text 4, such a proposition would be neither true nor false, and would therefore be considered absurd and a violation of the principle of bivalence.

Leibniz wants to prove that any indeterminacy about the existence of something has to be regarded as being in conflict with an adherence to the principle of bivalence. Suppose that there is another series of things, completely unrelated to our own, and that an individual *m* exists therein. We are not able to say if

m is simultaneous with us, i.e., if it exists now, or existed at an instant of time prior/posterior to the present one. Thus, we can say of m neither that it exists now nor that it does not exist now; accordingly, both the propositions “ m exists now” and “ m does not exist now” are without a determinate truth value. This, however, is a violation of the “first principle”, be it the law of excluded middle and the PNC (as stated in text 2), or, more correctly, as I will say, the principle of bivalence (as clearly stated in text 4).

Leibniz’s interest seems to be almost exclusively directed toward the truth-value of propositions and he is willing to reject the very same possibility of something like the lack of determination in assigning truth-values to propositions. Bivalence says exactly that every proposition has a determinate truth-value. This explains why Leibniz in text 2 seems to resort to the law of excluded middle in order to ground his argument: the excluded middle, as stated in text 2, is clearly implied by the principle of bivalence (while the same might not be true of the converse)³⁰.

An emphasis on bivalence must be connected with Leibniz’s account of truth in terms of conceptual containment. In this sense, it is not a coincidence that the most explicit text on this point is text 4, which is also the one chronologically closer to the metaphysics of the *Discourse*. Notice how the account of truth is given there in terms of inherence, i.e., a real, ontological containment, not just a linguistic one. Leibniz’s commitment to bivalence (i.e., to the conceptual containment account of truth) requires of him that he reject the very same possibility of what one can call (in a very broad sense) semantically undecidable propositions – namely, of propositions whose truth-value is not determined in itself³¹.

In the contemporary philosophical debate, Michael Dummett has clearly highlighted the connection between a commitment to bivalence and a realist

30 «First of all I assume that every judgment (i.e., affirmation or negation) is either true or false and that if the affirmation is true the negation is false, and if the negation is true the affirmation is false; that what is denied to be true –truly, of course –is false, and what is denied to be false is true; that what is denied to be affirmed, or affirmed to be denied, is to be denied; and what is affirmed to be affirmed and denied to be denied is to be affirmed. [...] All these are usually included in one designation, the *principle of contradiction*» (A VI 4: 804/L 225). See also A VI 4: 670. Cf. also the following passage: «Stated generally, the principle of contradiction is: *a proposition is either true or false*. This contains two assertions: first, that truth and falsity are incompatible in a single proposition, i.e., that *a proposition cannot be both true and false at once*; and second, that the contradictories or negations of the true and the false are not compatible, i.e., that there is nothing intermediate between the true and the false, or, better still, that *it cannot happen that a proposition is neither true nor false*» (NE IV, ii, §1, A VI 6: 362). What Leibniz class PNC here is the principle of bivalence, from which Leibniz derives both what we call the law of non-contradiction and the excluded middle. For a different reading, see Ishiguro (1990: 58).

31 This, for instance, is what happens in the case of (what Leibniz takes to be) Aristotle’s solution to the problem of propositions concerning future contingent events. In the *Theodicy*, Leibniz explicitly criticizes Aristotle for having rejected to apply bivalence to the case of contingent futures. See *Theodicy*, §169 (GP VI 211). See also §331, GP VI 311; Grua 479–480. Cf. also Leibniz’s letter to Fardella, August 1691, A II 2: 440–441.

theory of truth. Realism about truth says that a statement p can be true (or false) even if there is (or, better still, there can be) nothing which would count for us as proof of the truth (or falsity) of p . In other words, the truth of p is completely independent from the possibility of any verification procedure by means of which we could justify our stating p . The opposite view (defended by Dummett himself) is an anti-realist theory, which makes truth dependent not as much on truth-conditions (and bivalence) as on the conditions of justifiability of a statement.

7.6. *Phaenomena Dei* and God's Knowledge of Actuality

From texts 1–4 above, it is clear that for Leibniz, both the justificationist approach (based on the principle of verification) and the realist one (based on bivalence) seem to go hand in hand, as if they were just two aspects of one and the same approach. In the case of human knowledge, however, these two approaches can and should be distinguished: Leibniz clearly accepts that there is just a way in which things are, but that, in many cases, we are not able to know it. When coming to the case of an infinite and omniscient mind, however, one should say that there can be no real distinction between the reality of truth (in the sense of “realism”) and what God proves or, at least, sees to be true (reference to seeing/intuiting vs. proving seems to be required by Leibniz's account of contingent truths in terms of infinite analysis, but also, as we will see, by his reference to God's knowledge of vision). In the case of the mind of God (or of God's act of perceiving the actual world as such), then, there can be no real distinction between the verification-based approach and the bivalence-based one³².

32 As Dummett himself acknowledges: «If we had a language in which every statement that could be framed admitted of an effective means – effective at least in principle – for deciding its truth or falsity, there would be no practical difference between a justificationist and a truth-conditional explanation of meaning» (Dummett 2004: 69). Such a language might correspond to divine thought, or, which is the same, to the theory of complete concepts. A suggestion in this sense can be found in Leibniz's draft of a letter to the Socinian theologian Samuel Crell (June 1708), where Leibniz criticizes Crell's idea that God has no knowledge of contingent futures: «For if we concede that the past or the present is perfectly known by God, we must also concede that knowledge of future things, since every present is pregnant with the future; so that one who perfectly knows the present finds in it everything future, not indeed by a connection absolutely necessary, but rather founded on the reason of the better. For it must always be possible to give a reason for any event whatsoever, and the reasons for future things must assuredly be drawn from the past [...] To say nothing of the fact that that in God's view (which is the same as saying: in the very truth of things) nothing corporeal is absolutely great or small, but those things which seem to us most minute contain within themselves a certain world of creatures, as follows from the perpetual actual subdivision of the continuum (*Nam si praeteritum aut praesens perfecte a Deo cognosci concedimus, concedenda illa etiam est cognitio futurorum, quoniam omne praesens futuri gravidum est, ut qui praesens perfecte novit, in eo omne inveniat futurum, connexione non quidem necessaria absolute, sed fundata praeterea in ratione melioris. Semper enim oportet ut ratio reddi possit eventui cujuscunque, et rationes futurorum utique ex praeteritis sunt sumendae [...]*) Ut taceat apud Deum vel quod idem est, in rerum veritate nihil corporeum absolute magnum et parvum esse,

A justificationist approach, like the one defended by Dummett (whose preference went to an intuitionistic logic rather than to a classical one), defends the claim that there are “gaps” in reality, i.e., questions for which there is no yes/no answer (and where bivalence, thus, fails). Since the divine mind, for Leibniz, is something like the quintessence of the classical reasoner, he could not admit something like the presence of gaps in reality. The completeness of the world is required by (and also requires) the determinate character of whatever happens therein, and, therefore, of every statement or proposition concerning whatever happens therein – particularly if a merely possible world is composed of propositions or concepts rather than of flesh-and-blood individuals

The case of two (or more) existent and not related worlds, admittedly, is more difficult to deal with. First of all, having to do with existent worlds, one has to shift from God’s knowledge of the possible (or *scientia simplicis intelligentiae*) to knowledge of actuality (or *scientia visionis*). In the case of the knowledge of merely possible worlds, infinitely many different worlds can be placed in the logical space which is God’s understanding. Being just a logical space, it makes sense that no relation of distance holds between what exists in a world and what exists in another one. In the case of God’s knowledge of vision, however, the existence of two (or more) existing but mutually unrelated worlds would amount to an acceptance of the presence of gaps in reality, for the very simple reason that the mutual isolation of worlds consists in the lack of cross-world spatiotemporal and causal relations.

This would be true especially in the case in which God’s knowledge of vision consists of God’s act of seeing the relations between actually existing individuals: in the case of two isolated but existing worlds, it would be impossible (in principle) for God to see the relation between an individual A in world w_1 and an individual B in w_2 , especially for what concerns the spatiotemporal situation of B with respect to A (or vice versa). In particular, it would be impossible, even for God, to say if B exists simultaneously with A or not; and given that we have made the hypothesis that both A and B are existing, from the presence of a gap in reality one should infer that there is a gap in God’s knowledge of what exists.

Of course, much of this reconstruction of Leibniz’s argument is purely speculative, because Leibniz, as I have shown above, always presents his argument from the point of view of those of us who exist in the actual world, not from a God’s-eye perspective. Since the core of the argument is based, moreover, on the impossibility of establishing any relation of temporal connection between us (and all our surroundings) and what (would) happen in another existing world, it seems difficult to say in which sense this situation could be applied to the case of God’s knowledge.

sed quae nobis minima videntur quendam creaturarum mundum in se continere, quemadmodum consequitur ex continui perpetua subdivisione actuali» (LBr. 182, Bl 4r, italics mine). The italicized passage in the last sentence shows that God is identified with the truth.

In a note drafted in April 1676, Leibniz wrote: «God is the perfect mind, and that mind is the cause of its own perceptions; which is not the case with any other mind» (A VI 3, 516/DSR 71). God's being the cause of his own perceptions means that God is a purely active mind, whereas, finite minds in general, and human ones in particular, all share, to the contrary, a sort of passivity. This claim has to be taken in connection with the idea that our minds produce phenomena, whereas the divine mind produces things («*nostra mens phaenomenon facit, divina Rem*», C 528; cf. Jenschke 2015). At the same time, however, the divine mind also produces our minds as well.

This means that phenomena are accessible to other minds and not only those of humans; were this not the case, it would be impossible to understand the way in which God could be said to have knowledge of the actual world.

The latter point is emphasized in another note of the end of 1676:

There is no doubt that God understands how we perceive things; just as someone who wants to provide a perfect conception of a town will represent it in several ways. And this understanding of God, in so far as it understands our way of understanding, is very like our understanding. Indeed, our understanding results from it, from which we can say that God has an understanding which is in a way like ours. For God understands things as we do but with this difference: that he understands them at the same time in infinitely many other ways, whereas we understand them in one way only. (A VI 3: 400/DSR 115)

This passage has to be read together with what Leibniz will write ten years later in the famous section 14 of the *Discourse*:

For God, so to speak, turns on all sides and in all ways the general system of phenomena which he finds good to produce in order to manifest his glory, and he views all the faces of the world in all the ways possible, since there is no relation that escapes his omniscience. The result of each view of the universe, as seen from a certain position, is a substance which expresses in conformity with this view, should God see fit to render his thought actual and to produce this substance. (A VI 4: 1549–1550/AG 46–47)³³

33 A more tentative passage can be read in a text dated around 1681: «Insofar as God relates the universe to a certain determinate body, and views the whole as though from this body – or, what is the same thing, thinks of all appearances or relations of things with respect to this body, considered as immobile – by that very fact the substantial form or soul of this body results from it [...]» (A VI 4: 1460). Here (but not in the passage from the *Discourse*) Leibniz explicitly refers to what we can call the idea of “monadic embodiment”, i.e., the idea that all created monads must be embodied to partake of the ordered structure of the world as a series of things; cf. C 14: «And indeed every simple substance has an organic body corresponding to it, otherwise it would not have a suitable position in [the order of] the universe alongside other things, nor could it act and undergo passions in an orderly arrangement; nevertheless they are themselves without parts» (italics mine). Cf. also GP VI 546/L 590; GP VII 502; Leibniz to De Volder, December 1702 (or June 1703), A II 4: 137/LDV 267–269.

In section 14 of the *Discourse*, Leibniz also adds that it is God alone that is the cause of the mutual correspondence between the phenomena of different substances. In other words, this means that only God, properly speaking, is able to see the relations occurring between different substances («he views all the faces of the worlds in all ways possible, since there is no relation that escapes his omniscience», A VI 4: 1500).

Two points should be emphasized here: (a) God's knowledge of phenomena amounts to his knowledge of the relations obtaining between different substances in this world (and, therefore, to the very same reality of these relations); (b) God's way of having knowledge of this world is twofold. Concerning (a), this is the sense in which one has to take Leibniz's later reference to the *phaenomena Dei* in a study for a letter to Des Bosses of February 1712:

If bodies are phenomena, and are judged by our appearances, they will not be real, since they will appear differently to others. Thus, the reality of bodies, space, motion, and time seems to consist in this: that they are the phenomena of God, that is, the object of his knowledge of vision (*scientia visionis*). And the difference between the appearance of bodies with respect to us and their appearance with respect to God is in some way like the difference between a drawing in perspective (*scenographiam*) and a ground plan (*ichnographiam*). For whereas drawings in perspective differ according to the position of the viewer, a ground plan or geometrical representation is unique. God certainly sees things exactly such as they are according to geometrical truth, although likewise he also knows how each thing appears to every other, and thus he contains in himself eminently all the other appearances. Moreover, God does not only consider single monads and the modifications of any monad whatsoever, but he also sees their relations, and the reality of relations and truths consists in this. (GP II 438/LDB 231–233)³⁴

Here Leibniz explicitly says that the reality of motion, space and time consists in the fact that they are God's phenomena. Since all these things are made up of relations, he also concludes that the reality of relations among different substances (and the modifications of different substances), i.e., inter-monadic relations, consists in their being the object of God's *scientia visionis*. This holds especially in the case of the universal connection of all things: relations of connection (like spatiotemporal and causal ones) are real insofar as they are the object of God's knowledge³⁵.

34 The most extensive commentary to this text is Brown (1987).

35 In his late remarks on Temmik (ca. 1715–16), Leibniz writes that «Two things are realized by the divine intellect: all the eternal truths and, among the contingent truths, all those implying relations (*Duo igitur realisantur per solum divinum intellectum, veritates aeternae omnes et ex contingentibus respectivae*)» (LH IV, 8, Bl. 60r; Mugnai 1992: 155). On the use of the verb "to realize" in the case of God's understanding, see Leibniz's remark in *De Rerum Originatione Radicali*, GP VII 305/ AG 152

In order to understand how something like God's knowledge of phenomena is possible, Leibniz resorts to (b), i.e., the distinction between God's two ways of understanding things, something he had already envisaged in the passage from the Paris note quoted above. Here, however, he employs a different image, that of the difference between a perspectival representation (*scenographia*) and a ground plan representation (*ichnographia*)³⁶. In this way, God knows things not only as they are in themselves but also how each of them appears to every other (or, better still, how each of them would appear to every other, were this world to be actualized)³⁷.

This is why, I think, one is entitled to attribute to God (or, at least, to God's knowledge of vision) what Leibniz says about the way in which, from the analysis of phenomena, we can draw the ideas of body, space, time, world; a process he recreates in a text from the end of the 1670s –namely, the important draft edited as *Definitiones Cogitationesque Metaphysicae* (A VI 4: 1393–1405/LoC 237–257). As we have already seen above, space is characterized as what allows us to distinguish between the world of real phenomena and that of imaginary ones: those phenomena to which we can assign a position in this space, then, are called “bodies”. The introduction of change, which «disturbs the assigned situation [of these bodies in space]», requires us to distinguish between simultaneous phenomena and those which are not simultaneous (past/future ones); thus time, as a «relation of things with each other», is introduced, and comprises «the whole of everything [not only of what is simultaneous], for nothing can occur which is neither before nor after nor simultaneous with any other given thing» (the principle of connection).

Once we have space and time thus characterized, we can conclude that «the collection of all bodies that are understood to be in space, i.e., those that have mutual situation, is called the world, and there are various states of the world at various times» (A VI 4: 1397/LoC 243). This is nothing other than the definition of world we have found in the *Theodicy*: «the entire succession and the whole collection of all existent things».

36 Cf. A VI 4: 1618/LoC 309. The distinction between *scenographia* and *ichnographia* was explained by Goclenius in the following way: «An *ichnography* is the delineation either of plane figures or of common sections, which are produced by the plane of the common horizon and by those surfaces which, having been drawn through the outlines of the bodies to be delineated, stand perpendicular to the horizon (*Ichnographia est delineatio aut figurarum planarum, aut communium sectionum, quas efficiunt planum horizontis communis, eaeque superficies, quae per lineamenta corporum delineandorum traiectae, horizonti ad perpendicularum insistent*)» (*Lexicon philosophicum*, Fracofurti 1613: 1009b).

37 Cf. also Grua 583 (dated around 1694–98), where Leibniz writes: «There are two kinds of knowledge, that of facts, which is called “perception” and that of reason, which is called “intelligence”. Perception is of singular things, intelligence has for its object universal or eternal truths [...]» (italics in the original). Attributing perception to God, then, is necessary in order to grant him the possibility of having knowledge of singular truths (or truths about individuals).

The distinction between *scientia simplicis intelligentiae* and *scientia visionis* is the epistemic counterpart of that between God's *potentia absoluta* and his *potentia ordinata* (i.e., between absolute omnipotence and his ordained power). This means that the plurality of worlds is impossible only as far as God's ordained power is concerned; from the point of view of God's absolute power, on the other hand, it should be possible (since it does not seem to imply a logical contradiction *tout court*). This is the reason why Leibniz sometimes says that a plurality of worlds is just an unnecessary hypothesis, and not an impossible one (here "impossible" has to be taken as referring to what God can do *de potentia absoluta*); in the passages 1–4 (quoted at the beginning of §7.4), on the contrary, the impossibility of a plurality of worlds has been proved as far as is concerned what God can do *de potentia ordinata*³⁸.

In the theological tradition before Leibniz, it was constantly maintained that a plurality of worlds is possible only from the point of view of God's omnipotence, but that thus plurality must be rejected when it comes to taking God's ordained power into consideration. The main difference, of course, between Leibniz and the theological tradition consists in the peculiar way in which he interprets reference to God's absolute power³⁹. The hypothesis of a plurality of worlds, moreover, has the same modal status of the hypothesis of a solitary monad (or a solipsistic universe), and it has to be taken as possible/impossible depending on the extension of God's power which is taken into consideration.

Regarding the latter point, there is an important difference between Leibniz's approach to possible worlds and our contemporary approach to modal metaphysics. From the contemporary point of view, there is no problem in rephrasing the hypothesis of the solitary monads in terms of a possible world with only a single individual (being possible, however, means that it can be created by

38 Another way to substantiate Leibniz's reference to *ordained power* (taken as a subset of what God could do/have done according to his absolute power) is by reference to what is possible within – or compatible with – the order of nature (with the exception of miracles). This point will be emphasized by Leibniz in the preface to the *New Essays*: «I acknowledge that we must not deny what we do not understand, but I add that we are entitled to deny (within the natural order at least) whatever is absolutely unintelligible and inexplicable [...] [A]lthough what creatures conceive is not the measure of God's powers, their *conceptivity* or power of conceiving is the measure of nature's powers: everything which is in accord with the natural order can be conceived or understood by some creature» (A VI 6: 66). Cf. the passage already quoted above: «And this understanding of God, in so far as it understands our way of understanding, is very like our understanding» (A VI 3: 400/DSR 115). Cf. also Rutherford (1992). As Rutherford has rightly pointed out, there is a close connection between the intelligibility (or, in our case, perceptibility) requirement and God's wisdom: «God has gone so far as to write the conditions of intelligibility into the very fabric of the world, such that for whatever obtains within the order of nature it is possible to understand why it obtains in terms of the intrinsic natures of the beings which comprise the world» (1992: 45).

39 Cf. Mondadori (1988). On the history of the distinction between absolute and ordained power, see Courtenay (1990).

God). From the point of view of Leibniz, however, it would have been difficult to say that such a situation (which he sometimes dubs as a “fiction”⁴⁰) represents a genuine possible world: just because the constraints necessary in order to conceive of a world are stricter than those required by entertaining a mere metaphysical possibility (conceivability without contradiction)⁴¹.

7.7. Leibnizian Actualism

Howsoever intriguing it may be, my reconstruction of Leibniz’s argument against the plurality of worlds would not be able to convince someone who endorses modal realism: because it is entirely based on the distinction between what holds in the case of God’s knowledge of vision and what holds in the case of God’s knowledge of simple understanding. Now, this distinction presupposes an absolute distinction between what is actual and what is barely possible, and, therefore, the non-egalitarian view that existence is a privileged status.

In this sense, it seems that no contradiction at all can be derived from the hypothesis of a plurality of worlds, and, thus, Leibniz’s semantic stipulation about the meaning of ‘world’ cannot be accepted without proof. This point has also been emphasized by a Leibnizian scholar, who has thus concluded that «[t]he claim that there is only one actual world is *not* a tautology. [...] There is no contradiction in supposing that, in a number of actual worlds that are not ours, actual thinking creatures are having these thoughts about their worlds»⁴².

Leibniz, in my opinion, has some reasons to resist such a conclusion, however. The very same way in which this criticism is formulated, indeed, is strongly

40 The world-apart (or the solitary monad) hypothesis is said to be a “fiction” as well as a bare “metaphysical possibility” by Leibniz in his discussion of Bayle’s article “Rorarius”; cf. GP IV 530: «But since that [the world-apart hypothesis] is contrary to the designs of God, who has willed that the soul and the things outside of it are in agreement, it is clear that this pre-established harmony destroys such a fiction, which is a metaphysical possibility, but which does not accord with the facts and their reasons». The important thing is what Leibniz here calls a metaphysical possibility does not correspond to a possible world in Leibniz’s sense.

41 On this “strict” understanding of (possible) world, see Adams (1994: 108–109), where he concludes that «a collection of substances that did not correspond with each other’s perceptions would not be sufficiently connected to constitute a single “world”». The opposite view has been recently defended by Anfray (2016: 555). According to Anfray, the above-mentioned passage at GP IV 519 («*Dieu pouvait donner à chaque substance ses phénomènes indépendants de ceux des autres, mais de cette manière il aurait fait, pour ainsi dire, autant de mondes sans connexion, qu’il y a de substances [...]*») affirms the real possibility of the creation of isolated substances, which would correspond to a plurality of non-connected worlds. However, such a supposition «*ne sauroit arriver dans l’ordre naturels*», as Leibniz says in the same text; cf. the convincing reading provided by Mondadori (1994a: 95ff).

42 Wilson (2000: 2). This is the same strategy employed by Lewis in order to dismantle the idea of absolute actuality: if we are immediately acquainted with the idea of our own actuality, says Lewis, «wouldn’t my elder sister have had it too, if only I’d had an elder sister? So there is, unactualised, off in some other world getting fooled by the very same evidence that is supposed to be giving me my knowledge» (Lewis 1986: 94).

inclined toward a realistic conception of possible worlds, one that, as I have said at the beginning, Leibniz clearly rejects. Lewis' criticism, indeed, makes sense only if one already conceives of non-actual individuals as if they were individuals "in flesh and bones" living in other worlds. The distinction between (absolute) existence and (relative) actuality is just a consequence of such a realistic picture of possible worlds⁴³.

Unlike what is suggested (or seems to be suggested) in passages like texts 1–4 above (§7.4), then, it seems to me that the unity of the existing world cannot be derived from something else (as if it were the conclusion of an argument). It should be taken, rather, as the starting point of Leibniz's whole system, as a mark of what I would like to call his strong bias in favour of actuality (one that could be – but does not necessarily have to be – contrasted with an altogether strong bias in favour of possibility). This is what stands out from what Leibniz himself says in text 1: «To introduce another genus of existing things [...] is to abuse the name of existing». This, as I will show in what follows, will be the ground for Leibniz's rejection of the very same meaningfulness of the expression "possible existence".

Note that all the passages 1–4 move from the point of view of someone who inhabits our own world, the actual world, where it is not the case that every possible is going to be realized just because there are many different (and mutually incompatible) ways in which our space and time could have been filled. This is exactly what Leibniz remarks in the continuation of the passage from the *Theodicy* which I have quoted above. Let me quote it more fully as follows:

I call "world" the entire succession and the whole collection of all existing things, lest it be said that several worlds could have existed in different times and different places. [...] *And even though one should fill all times and places, it still remains true that one might have filled them in innumerable ways, and that there is an infinity of possible worlds.* (GP VI 107/H 129, italics mine)

The infinity of possible worlds is presented here as the idea that there are innumerable ways of filling all times and places (of a world) and that, among them, God has chosen the best way. Notice that this is tantamount to saying not only that the universal connection holds in every possible world, but also that space and time are necessarily the same in every possible world.

To be precise, however, Leibniz remarks that «space and time [...] relate not only to what actually is but also to anything that could be put in its place»⁴⁴. Space and time, then, are orders of compossible things, but only insofar as

43 Cf. Look (2005).

44 GP IV 570/L 583; see also GP II 379, where Leibniz explicitly refers to "ideal space"; see also the distinction between possibilities (abstract entities) and possible individuals (complete concepts) developed in Chapter 9 below.

these possibles can be realized together in the same world. In this sense, spaces and times of different worlds are disconnected (or unrelated) not because these worlds are located in different places, but rather because they are supposed to occupy the same spatiotemporal framework, i.e., the spatiotemporal framework of the actual world⁴⁵.

Thus, according to Leibniz, there is no such things as a non-actual but existing individual (or world). Everything which is possible but cannot be connected with what exists in our series of things should therefore be excluded from existence: not from existence-in-this-world, but from existence *tout court*. Finally, it should be said that even this solution is not completely free from difficulties. In particular, I would outline two main problems. The first is constituted by the fact that it seems that we can only give an *a posteriori* explanation of why only one (actual) world exists, whilst an *a priori* explanation seems not to be available to us.

The second problem is that such a solution seems to be at odds with Leibniz's anti-substantialism about space and time, especially his views that space and time are determined by the things they contain, being supervenient on other, more fundamental properties of substances⁴⁶. This tension can be clearly detected from what Leibniz says in one of the most famous metaphysical essays of his late period, *De Rerum Originatione Radicali* (1697). Assuming that being has to prevail over non-being, or, which is the same, that «something has to pass from possibility to actuality, although nothing beyond this is determined [no further conditions are imposed], it follows that there would be as much as there possibly can be, given the capacity of time and space (that is, the capacity of the order of possible existence) [...]»⁴⁷.

The same view, however, had already been anticipated in an earlier text, in which Leibniz writes: «From many possible ways [of creating the world], the most perfect is the one which brings it about that more reality exists in a given volume or receptacle», from which it follows that more bodies are to be placed in a given space and more motions in a given time (i.e., more than in any other possible configuration of the world). Admittedly, especially among the writings of the young Leibniz, there are passages in which he explicitly talks of space and times as “receptacles”⁴⁸.

45 Cf. Di Bella (2009: 105), who makes this remark about time. The same, however, holds in the case of space as well: the impossibility of a plurality of (real) spaces seems to derive from the fact that two worlds are supposed to occupy the same spatial framework.

46 *De Rerum Originatione Radicali*, 23 November 1697, GP VII 304/AG 151. In this text, Leibniz proposes an analogy with tiles (or jigsaws) in order to explain God's optimization strategy. This way of explaining compossibility has been recently defended by McDonough (2010). Cf. Nachtomy (2016) for some critical remarks.

47 *Elementa Verae Pietatis*, 1677–78, A VI 4: 1359/LST 191.

48 Cf. in particular *De Mundo Praesenti*, ca.1684–85/6: «One can distinguish things in those that are receptacles, and those that occupy them, their receipts. *Time* and *place*, or space, are receptacles. The bodies which exist in them are receipts» (A VI 4: 1509/LoC 289). A Neoplatonic influence seems to be at work here; see De Risi (2012).

PART 3
MODALITY, ONTOLOGY, AND THE PUZZLE OF EXISTENCE

Introduction to Part Three

Chapters from 8 to 10 are entirely devoted to a discussion of Leibniz's notion of existence in his mature texts. In Chapter 8, I address the contrast between Leibniz's *a priori* and *a posteriori* account of existence, focusing on the question of the (im)possibility of providing a definition of existence, and on Leibniz's treatment of existential propositions.

Chapter 9 introduces the distinction between the modal and the ontological account of existence as a way to solve some of the tensions with Leibniz's account of existence (addressed in my Introduction above, and again at the end of Chapter 8). The period from the Paris notes to the first years in Hanover corresponds to a sort of revolution in Leibniz's way of thinking his modal ontology, i.e., the introduction of his possible worlds ontology. Since the end of the 1670s, moreover, he acknowledges the necessity of adopting the intensional point of view in his logical calculi, i.e., to regard logic mainly as a logic of concepts more than as a logic of classes in a proper sense. This move, however, entails an expansion of his ontology, which now encompasses not only actual entities but also merely possible ones.

This kind of ontology, however, seems to include not only actual individuals but even merely possible individuals. Given Leibniz's rejection of any form of modal realism, however, possible individuals are plainly to be understood as complete individual concepts; any talk of purely possible things, moreover, should generally always be rephrased in terms of talking about concepts and/or propositions. This means that the *reality* of essences and *possibilia* (in the sense of the Schoolmen's *realitas*) is combined with an ontology of purely *ideal* beings. Among the many available texts on this topic, I have chosen to focus on some passages which are usually neglected by many scholars. For instance, I will pay attention to Leibniz's discussion with Gabriel Wagner, which takes place between 1697 and 1698, especially because Leibniz discusses a strong nominalist (and physicalist) position defended by Wagner, and this will be useful to show the differences between Leibniz's mature views and his early account.

Insofar as existence is related to what is concrete vs. what is abstract – i.e., existence is the feature distinguishing what pertains to individuals from what pertains to general notions and specific essences – , it seems that it must be shared both by actual and merely possible things. For merely possible individuals (complete individual concepts) are to be regarded as possibly existing things (whereas abstract entities, like general essences or mathematical objects, cannot). This, however, seems to go against the (quite intuitive) view that, being *merely possible*, possible individuals are abstract as well, for (and insofar as) they make abstraction from existence.

As far as existence is clearly connected with what is actual, and with that alone, this conclusion has to be rejected; not surprisingly, indeed, there are passages where Leibniz shows his strong dissatisfaction with the notion of “possible existence”, which he takes to be a simply absurd. At other times, however, the same Leibniz cannot refrain from employing similar expressions and the very same expression, “possible existence” without pausing to consider the ways in which these expressions are problematic.

The discussion of the “puzzle of existence”, i.e., the combination of the view that existence does add something to a mere possible thing with the idea that existence cannot be regarded as a perfection, must be placed within this more general framework in order to be fully understood and appreciated. The same can be said about Leibniz’s (in)famous theory of the striving possibles, which will be interpreted here as a way to distinguish between a logical and an existential account of possibility. The existential sense of possibility, expressed in terms of the possibles’ having an urge towards existence (*exigentia existentiae* or *existurientia*) must be related to Leibniz’s characterization of possible individuals as involving possible causes (and also God’s possible decrees).

Another point which I will emphasize is the necessity of distinguishing between two different classes within the domain of the possible itself, i.e., between the possibles as essences (incomplete notions), and the possibles as possible individuals (individual essences or complete concepts). The main difference is that the latter have to be taken as possible in the sense of *possibly actual*, whereas the former cannot. My proposal is that abstract entities (among which possibles in the first sense are included) must be understood as necessarily non-actual; possible individuals (or individual essences: what complete individual concepts stands for and/or represent), on the other hand, are only contingently non-actual.

Chapter 8. *Ratio formalis existentiae*

8.1. Harmony, Infinity, and the Gap between the two Accounts of Existence

In his 1675 letter to Foucher, Leibniz repeats that the connection we constantly find in our appearances (the harmony among our perceptions and those of other minds) gives us only a moral assurance to the conclusion that they are appearances of something really existing “outside” of our perceptions. In order to fill the gap – from moral to metaphysical certainty – one should discover an *a priori* argument which would explain why things appear to us in this way and not in another one (why God, in other words, has rightly chosen this world and not another one, assuming a one-to-one correspondence between a world and a system of phenomena).

Notice also that the possibility of establishing *a priori* the metaphysical derivation of this world from “the ground of essence” is considered as equivalent to attaining the so-called “beatific vision” (*visio beatifica*), as a sort of immediate acquaintance with the essence of God (a knowledge of him “face to face”), which the theological tradition granted only to the blessed.

At this point, one has to remark that the question of why things are the way they appear to us (and not otherwise) is just the epistemic counterpart of the fundamental metaphysical question of why God created this series of things instead of another one. One might claim that, as far as the metaphysical question is concerned, Leibniz actually *does* have a strong answer to it, one following from his idea that God is (morally) necessitated to create the best; the world we happen to live in therefore is the best. In this sense, notice, both the perfection- and the perception-based accounts of existence should be subsumed under a more general explanation based on the notion of *harmony*.

God, indeed, chooses the most harmonious among infinitely many possible worlds; and the connection of phenomena is nothing but a mark or consequence of this harmony, since, after all, it is a sort of harmony among our perceptions and the perceptions of other substances. Harmony, thus, would constitute the bridge, so to speak, between the epistemic (or phenomenal) and the metaphysical level, just because the harmony among perceptions is nothing but a mirroring of the harmony of the possible world God has chosen to create, or, more briefly, the harmony between the perceptions of many substances is just a mirroring of “universal harmony”¹.

1 On the notion of harmony, see Mondadori (1978); Schneiders (1984); Rutherford (1995: 22–45); Carlin (2000).

So far so good, one would say. Notice, however, that the transition from “God creates what is best” to “This world we happen to live in is the best” would be granted only if we were able to prove that “This world we happen to live in is the world God has actualized, i.e., the actual world”; but no argument, or, better still, no *a priori* argument seems to be available to us in order to fill the gap in the demonstration.

In order to do this, indeed, we should be able to prove that the world as it appears to us (the phenomenal world) is not only a harmonic system (one in which everything is connected with everything else, everything can be predicted, where the simplest hypotheses explain the greatest number of phenomena, and so on); but, also, that it is the most harmonic one, that is, the most harmonic among all the other possible systems of phenomena God could have produced.

In a very interesting passage from the 1678–79 essay *Praefatio ad Libellum Elementorum Physicae*, Leibniz distinguishes two ways – an *a priori* and an *a posteriori* one – of discovering causes:

The *a priori* method is certain if we can demonstrate from the knowledge of God’s nature which structure of the world is in agreement with the divine reasons and, from this structure, we can finally arrive at the principle of sensible things. This method [...] does not seem to be entirely impossible. For our mind is endowed with the concept of perfection, and we know that God works in the most perfect way. I admit, however, that, though this way is not hopeless, it is certainly difficult and that not everyone should undertake it. Besides, it is perhaps too long to be covered by men. For sensible effects are too greatly compounded to be readily reduced to their first causes. [...] Yet we believe that the absolute use of this method is conserved for a better life (A VI 4: 1998/L 283).

Again, we have the twofold structure I have already pointed out above: the *a priori* method (from the knowledge of the nature of God to sensible things) seems to be possible insofar as we know that God acts in the most perfect way, but, at the same time, we know it only *generally*, and we cannot apply this principle to particular cases because «sensible effects are too greatly compounded» to be resolved into their first causes (in this life, at least; see the usual reference to beatific vision in the last line).

8.2. Existence and Infinity: The Case of Existential Propositions

This task, however, could be accomplished by an infinite mind only, and notice that, according to what is probably Leibniz’s considered view on the topic, even God is not able to demonstrate that this world is the best, but he can only see, with his infallible vision, that this world which he has actualized is the best of all possible worlds².

2 This is what seems to emerge from a comparison of the passages where the mature Leibniz introduces his infinite analysis theory of contingency with those in which he claims that

The connection between existence and infinity clearly results from a series of passages. For instance, in *De Natura Veritatis, Contingentiae et Indifferentiae* (ca. 1685–86), he says that «all the propositions which contain existence and time as their ingredients, contain also the whole series of things; because one cannot understand “now” and “here” if not by means of a relation to other things» (A VI 4: 1517). And later on, in a letter to De Volder (March 1705), he will repeat the same view: «Individuals involve infinity [...]. The essential ordering of individuals, i.e., the relation with respect to time and place, is to be understood from the relations to the contents of time and place, both near and far, which is necessarily expressed by each individual» (A II 4: 312/LDV 325)³.

Another interesting passage is in section 74 of Leibniz’s *General Inquiries on the Analysis of Notions and Truths* (1686), where the topic of infinite analysis is introduced:

All existential propositions are certainly true, but not necessarily so, for they cannot be demonstrated except by recourse to infinitely many things, i.e., by a resolution which will go through infinitely many facts, that is, only from the complete notion of an individual, which involves infinitely many existing things. Thus, if I say “Peter denies”, understanding this as referring to a certain time, undoubtedly the nature of that time is presupposed too, which also involves everything existent at that time. If I say “Peter denies” indefinitely, abstracting from time, so that it is true whether he has denied or will deny, then it must nevertheless be demonstrated from the concept of Peter at least. But the concept of Peter is complete and, what is more, it involves infinite things; therefore, we can never arrive at a perfect demonstration [...] (A VI 4: 763/GI 87)

Here Leibniz introduces a distinction between two ways of reading an existential proposition: “Peter denies” (*Petrus abnegat*) can be understood either *de certo tempore* or *abstrahendo a tempore*. The former reading is explicitly referred to the present time, because Leibniz says that it presupposes «everything existent at that time». Reference to a certain time *t* (like the present) involves everything

the proposition “This world is the best” is contingent. The most interesting passage is in *De Natura Veritatis, Contingentiae et Indifferentiae*, ca. 1685–86, A VI 4: 1517, where contingent propositions are equated with the existential ones, i.e., with those which are true of a certain time only and do not express the possibility of things alone but also their (conditional or actual) existence. The interesting point, which is emphasized at A VI 4: 1518, is that «even if someone would be able to know the whole series of the universe, he would not yet be able to provide a reason [for the truth of such propositions], without establishing a comparison between this universe and all the other possible ones». Thus, there is a double level of infinite analysis, one connected to the infinity of this series of things, and the other to the comparison between this infinite series with all the other possible ones. The most traditional account of infinite analysis is in Adams (1994: 22–45). See also Carriero (1993) and (1995).

3 But see already Leibniz’s remarks on Arnauld, June 1686, A II 2: 45 (or GP II 39). Cf. A VI 4: 1441, and A VI 4: 926: «*Individualia seu haecceitates ubi locus et tempus*».

that is simultaneous with that determinate event (i.e., the entire state of the world at t)⁴.

In the second reading, abstraction from time has to be understood in terms of abstraction from a specific time, or, which is the same, in terms of what happened in the past or will happen in the future. This reading can be assimilated to the theory of total denotation, which, as shown in Chapter 2 above, was the key to Thomasiaus' solution to the problem of eternal truths. Here, Leibniz is applying the theory of "total denotation" to the case of existential propositions; which makes sense, since, after all, that theory had been originally conceived in order to justify the necessity *ex hypothesi* of universal propositions, and was explicitly based on the notion of existence. In this second case, Leibniz also concludes that one has to refer to the complete concept of an individual (the complete concept of Peter⁵); this, however, would involve infinity.

One can push the analysis one step forward, moreover, and interpret existential propositions *de certo tempore* as tensed, especially insofar as reference to the present time is involved, while existential propositions which make abstraction from temporal determinations might be regarded as a sort of tenseless version, which can be obtained by transforming propositions involving temporal indexes (like "now") into eternal propositions (which involve, perhaps, only reference to those time-relations explicitly mentioned by Leibniz in his formal analysis: to posteriority or to simultaneity).

The validity of interpreting existential propositions as tensed might find a confirmation in an interesting remark concerning the relation between time and copula, which occurs in a passage from one of the most important of the texts Leibniz devoted to linguistic analysis:

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- 4 In A VI 4: 1517, among contingent propositions, Leibniz includes those «which are true only of a certain time (*quae certo tempore sunt verae*)», which do not express only what pertains to the possibility of things but also what exists in actuality (or what will exist in the future, given that certain things are posited now). The laws of physics are counted among these contingent truths: if we look for the reason for a certain phenomenon, we go to the infinite, since its full reason could be explained only by taking into account «a perfect cognition of all the parts of the universe», which is impossible for us given the actual infinite division of matter; cf. also the conclusion of an unpublished text (ca. 1690): «Meanwhile [...] to distinguish bodies and conceive a difference among them, we use indistinct qualities; and, even though we cannot explain the way in which they appear to us, for they involve an expression of infinite things, and even of the whole universe, however, it is sufficient that we are able to notice attributes that may be thought in a distinct way and which are connected with these confused ideas by means of a certain constant rule, so that, thence, we are able to get a certain set of rules and reasons and predictions [which are useful] in practice» (*Inquisitio in Aliquid Absolutum*, LH IV, 7C, Bl. 80v). The pragmatic approach, once again, is presented as a second-best solution.
- 5 The distinction between complete and incomplete notions had been introduced in §71 of the *General Inquiries*, where, in the case of existential propositions, Leibniz noted: «this is the difference between an individual or complete term and any other term; for, if I say "some man is a denier", "man" does not contain "denial", as it is an incomplete term, nor does "man" contain everything that can be said of that of which it can itself be said» (A VI 4: 762/GI 85).

Copula always includes a certain *time*, and the same holds also in the case of every proposition or statement; and this is the reason why the grammarians say that verbs are names that connote time. However, the reason why every statement connotes time is that the very same statement can be true and false at different times, when all the other things remain the same. It is clear, of course, that there are also some necessary propositions, but the grammarians are not accustomed to consider them; anyway, it will be useful to devise a certain tense like the aorist, which should be employed in the case of eternal propositions. Since, for instance, a triangle is always a trilateral, it will be useful to employ a certain tense which could signify perpetual being, i.e., the fact that a triangle had been, is, and will always be a trilateral, or, better said, the fact that even though no triangle at all exists now, nevertheless when it will exist or had existed it will be or had been a trilateral⁶.

Leibniz moves from the traditional account according to which copula “connotes” time (the traditional view of the *consignificatio temporis*, which dates back to Aristotle), in order to hint at a distinction between two different temporal readings of propositions. The first is the explicitly temporal, or, perhaps, *tensed*, reading of propositions concerning contingent events, for their truth-value changes from one moment of time to another.

The second consists in employing a certain particular tense (like the Greek aorist) which should be able to signify perpetual being(s), as the fact that necessary and essential propositions are always true and their truth is independent from the existential import of their subject-terms. Notice how the claim that the fact that «a triangle had been, is, and will always be a trilateral» is immediately rephrased into the more correct formulation that «even though no triangle at all exists now, nevertheless when it will exist or had existed, it will be or had been a trilateral»⁷. The introduction of a new temporal form (a new “tense”, like the aorist), therefore, is the device Leibniz envisages (at the linguistic level) to emphasize the non-tensed character (at the metaphysical level) of essential propositions.

8.3. *Altitudo Divitiarum*. The Mystery of Existence

In the previous section I have emphasized the relevance of infinity in dealing with Leibniz’s attempt at making sense of the notion of existence, especially in his account of existential propositions. Logical and metaphysical questions in Leibniz are strictly related to Leibniz’s interest in the question of theodicy.

6 *De Lingua Philosophica*, ca. 1687–88, A VI 4: 882–883. On the problem of temporary truths, see also Merlo (2018).

7 Cf. the discussion in *Inquirenda Logico-Metaphysica*, ca. 1689–90, A VI 4: 997. Unfortunately, the details of this extremely interesting passage are beyond the scope of our discussion here. I have originally discussed this and other texts in a chapter of my dissertation (2018) devoted to “Possibilia, Essences and Propositions”; the conclusions I have drawn there, however, need to be reconsidered and discussed separately in another paper.

In the important text *De Contingentia* (ca. 1689), for instance, Leibniz writes as follows:

It is certain that there is a connection between the subject and the predicate in every truth. Therefore, when one says “Adam who sins exists”, it is necessary that there be something in this possible notion, “Adam who sins”, by virtue of which he is said to exist (*Ideo cum dicitur “Adam peccans, existit”, necesse est, ut sic aliquid in hac notione possibili “Adamus peccans”, propter quod existere dicatur*). (A VI 4: 1651/AG 29)

The English translation conceals the fact that, in the proposition *Adamus peccans existit*, the notion of “Adam-the-sinner” (taken as possible, as Leibniz remarks) is the subject, and “exists” is the predicate⁸. Leibniz seems to say, therefore, that the conceptual containment account of truth holds in the case of existential propositions as well. This does not mean, however, that he must assume existence as a property or a predicate, especially if “existence” is taken as being synonymous with “actuality”. Leibniz does not say that “existence” is contained in the notion of “Adam-the-sinner”, but, rather, that there is *something* in this notion (“Adam-the-sinner”, as merely possible), because of which one can say that it exists. That “something” might presumably be the fact that the notion of that individual (together with all of his properties, sin included) belongs to the more perfect set of possible things. It is only because of the latter that one can say that such an individual notion has been instantiated.

A somewhat similar question will be touched upon in section 30 of the *Discourse*, concerning the possibility or impossibility of providing a reason for contingent events, like Judas’ sin (and, thus, a reason for the truth of the correspondent contingent proposition). First of all, Leibniz explains that the correct way of posing the question is not to ask «why this man will assuredly commit this sin» (answer: since, otherwise, he would not be *this* man), but rather: «why does such a Judas-the-traitor, who is merely possible in God’s idea, actually exist?»

8 As Stefano Di Bella has pointed out (Di Bella 2005a: 276–279), this matches with Leibniz’s treatment of propositions in the *General Inquiries*, where propositions *tertii adjecti* (like “*A* is *B*”) can be reduced to propositions *secundi adjecti* (like “*AB* is”), where the latter can have both an essential and an existential reading. The possibility of reading a proposition *de tertii adjecti* (like “Peter is a denier”) in terms of the corresponding proposition *de secundi adjecti* (like “Peter-the-denier is”) has a clear connection with Leibniz’s theological view that God, in creating the world, did not decree that Peter should be a denier (since the concept of “denying” was already contained in the notion of Peter), but only that the whole concept Peter-the-denier should be instantiated.

9 A remarkable exception is represented by a draft *De Propositionibus Existentialibus*, ca. 1688, A VI 4: 1631–1633, where Leibniz explicitly tries to read *existens* as a term, a strategy he had already partially envisaged in the *General Inquiries* (see §71, A VI 4: 762). This approach to existential propositions, however, turns out to be extremely problematic, especially when modal notions are taken into consideration; cf. Poser (1969: 51–54).

Leibniz's answer to this second, correct formulation of the question is as follows:

But no reply to this question is to be expected on earth, except that, in general, one must say that, since God found it good that he should exist, despite the sin that God foresaw, it must be that this sin is paid back with interest in the universe, that God will derive a greater good from it, *and that it will found out that, in sum, the sequence of things in which the existence of that sinner is included is the most perfect among all the possible sequences.* But we cannot always explain the admirable economy of this choice while we are travellers in this world; *it is enough to know it without understanding it.* And here is the occasion to recognize the *altitudo divitiarum*, the depth and the abyss of divine wisdom, without seeking a detail that involves infinite considerations. (*Discourse on Metaphysics*, §30, A VI 4: 1576–1577/AG 61)

The distinction between “knowing” (*savoir*) and “understanding” (*comprendre*) corresponds to that between *intelligere* (and *cognitio*) and *comprehendere* (and *comprehensio*); the same distinction can be usefully employed to understand the sense in which Leibniz might say that should necessarily acknowledge that there are individual notions of individual substances, even though only God is able to understand them, since human thought is unable to grasp the infinite complexity of complete concepts¹⁰. Again, in the passage from the *Discourse*, Leibniz repeats the traditional theme of the distinction between the possibility of knowing *in statu viatoris* and the contemplation of God we could attain through the beatific vision.

Finally, one must notice Leibniz's reference to divine wisdom, whose inscrutability is here associated with a reference to the Pauline notion of *altitudo divitiarum* (from Romans 11:33)¹¹. Commenting on Bellarmino's treatise on free will, for instance, Leibniz clearly equates what he calls Paulus' abyss (*abyssus Pauli*) with universal harmony, i.e., with «the harmony of things which goes beyond what can be grasped by the human mind, even though our mind knows that it exists» (A VI 4: 1451).

10 In his remarks on Toland, Leibniz writes: «Divine nature itself is necessarily incomprehensible because it is infinite. Likewise, in all substances there is something infinite as well. Hence it happens that we can perfectly understand only incomplete notions, like those of numbers, figures, and other modes of this kind produced by making abstraction from things». The quote is taken from Leibniz's remarks on John Toland's *Christianity Not Mysterious: Annotatiunculae subitaneae ad Tolandi Librum De Christianismo Mysteris carente*, 8 August 1701, Dutens V: 147. For a discussion of this text see Antognazza (2013); Ottaviani (2021c).

11 The passage from Paul was also quoted by Augustine, *Sermones*, XXVII, 7: «Quaeris tu rationem, ego expavesco altitudinem. O altitudo divitiarum sapientiae et scientiae Dei! Tu ratiocinare, ego mirer. Tu disputa, ego credam. Altitudinem video, ad profundum non pervenio (You ask for a reason; I tremble before the abyss. Oh the depth of the riches of the wisdom and knowledge of God! You do the reasoning; let me wonder. You dispute; I will believe. I see the height, but I do not reach the depth)». Cf. also Rudolph (2017).

The most telling passage, however, occurs in a series of notes on Arminian theology dated to around 1691–95, in which Leibniz discusses at length his theological account of different possible worlds that God could have created. He also repeats his standard account, according to which God cannot choose the destiny of a determined individual (like Adam, Peter or Judas), since his destiny is already inscribed in the individual notion of that individual. Thus, properly speaking, God does not will Judas' sin, but admits Judas-the-sinner into existence nevertheless since Judas-the-sinner belongs to the best possible world.

In this passage, Leibniz also wants to emphasize the holistic account of the series of things: properly speaking, indeed, God's decree does not concern the possibility of admitting Judas-the-sinner or Peter-the-denier into existence, as if these could be taken in isolation from the world to which they belong. What God does decree is not this or that single fact, but only «whether he wants to admit to existence that universal series of possibles, which, among infinite other ones, contains Peter and Judas affected in such and such a way» (Grua 343).

At this point, Leibniz continues as follows:

Furthermore, this makes clear what is, according to Paul, the *altitudo divitiarum*. It can be explained by means of the following syllogism: Whatever is the best, it should be taken as fit to be produced by God. This series of the universe is the best. Therefore, this series of the universe should be taken as fit to be produced by God. The major premise cannot be doubted, it follows from the nature of divine wisdom. But the minor proposition, even though it should be taken for certain by us from what is happened (*ex eventu*), i.e., for the very same fact that it has been produced we should state that this series is the best, however, it cannot be comprehended and understood by us *a priori* (i.e., by the inspection of the very same nature of the series). And the *altitudo divitiarum* consists exactly in this: for in the universe there are infinitely many creatures, and among these there are many which are much more perfect than men. Neither the human being, if not insofar as it has been sublimated in Christ, can be considered of great importance in God's eyes. Therefore, God had infinitely many reasons concurring which each other, which he had to take into account when he judged this possible universe as worthy to be chosen. (Grua 343)¹²

12 See also *Dialogue effectif sur la Liberté de l'Homme et l'Origine du Mal*, 25 January 1695: «Thus, we must believe that God would not have allowed sin nor would he have created things he knows will sin, if he could not derive from them a good incomparably greater than the resulting evil. [...] I can assure you that it is, but I cannot explain it in detail. One would have to know the general harmony of the universe for that, whereas we know only a very small parts» (A II 3: 14 or Grua 366/AG 115, italics mine). He also refers to St. Paul's *altitudo divitiarum* in the line immediately following the quoted passage.

8.4. A Place for Divine Wisdom

The equivalence between the two accounts of existence (the *a priori* and the *a posteriori* account) cannot be explained in strict metaphysical terms, since to prove it would go much beyond the limit of natural reason. If a rational proof cannot be provided, however, it seems that one can recur to a theological argument, as Leibniz's continuous appealing to divine wisdom seems to suggest.

In this sense, one can observe that Leibniz's attitude toward the moral certainty we can attain from the dream-argument and the perception-based account of existence based on the reality of phenomena has been changed between the time of his 1675 letter to Foucher and his late exposition of the same question in the *New Essays*. In the latter work, indeed, he comes back to the dream argument, once again entertaining the possibility that the whole sequence of our life (or the entire succession of our phenomena) be nothing but a well-ordered dream:

Consequently I believe that where objects of the senses are concerned the true criterion is the linking together of phenomena (*la liaison des phenomenes*), i.e., the connectedness of what happens at different times and places and in the experience of different men [...]. It must be acknowledged, though, [...] that none of this certainty is of the highest degree. For it is not impossible, metaphysically speaking, for a dream to be as coherent and prolonged as a man's life. *But this would be as contrary to reason as the fiction of a book's resulting by chance from jumbling the printer's type together*¹³.

In this passage, the usual reference to "moral certainty" has not to be taken as exclusively referring to a pragmatic account of reality. The latter, of course, is not absent from this text, since it is immediately mentioned in the passage following the one I have just quoted.

In the lines I have highlighted, however, a somewhat different sense of "moral certainty" is emphasized by Leibniz: the hypothesis of a life-long, well-ordered illusion would be "contrary to reason" as the case of a book (which is a well-ordered story) composed in a completely random way. Leibniz's rejection of what has been called "order from noise" is typically a rejection of the plausibility of atomism, as it is clear from a passage in which he associates the latter with Epicurus' conception of a plurality of worlds.

In this passage, Leibniz clearly shows that the rejection of atomism is motivated not only by its implausibility, but also by the fact that an acceptance of atomism would be contrary to an architectonic and finalistic view of creation, that is, it would be contrary to God's wisdom:

However, from the sole beauty of things it is at least highly probable that the world has been created by a very wise architect, even if this conclusion is not

¹³ *New Essays*, IV, ii, §14, A VI 6: 375 (italics mine). Cf. Brown (2004).

necessary, since, metaphysically speaking, it would be possible that an infinity of worlds or system of things exist in an infinite space and time, and it would not be strange if, among these infinite worlds randomly assembled, some beautiful and well-ordered ones had emerged, one of which has been given to us by fate¹⁴.

As I have already argued, reference to divine wisdom plays a fundamental explanatory role in Leibniz's account of God's choice of the world to create. This, then, is perfectly consistent with our discussion in Chapter 6. In particular, we know that Leibniz had at some point (at the end of 1670s) started to envisage a close connection between God's absolute wisdom and his choice of the best (the latter having to be explained and justified in terms of the former); at the same time, however, he drew the conclusion that such a theological ground could play an analogous explanatory role in providing a justification for the coherence of phenomena as the mark of reality.

In other words, the idea of moral necessity of the best comes to support and reinforce the idea of moral certainty concerning the reality of the world. The consequence of this evolution of Leibniz's thought extends also to his way of understanding the conclusion of the dream-argument, as we have said when comparing its original formulation in the letter to Foucher and the final version in the *New Essays*.

Again, evidence of this sort of *Gestalt* shift can be found in the texts of the middle period. In a paper written around 1683–85, for instance, Leibniz concludes that «the reality of bodies is not different from the reality of dreams, except for the fact that they are constant and depend on certain rules; *moreover, these rules derive from the will of God, that is, from his understanding of the best*»¹⁵. And, in another text, he maintains that «nothing but appearances are perceived» and concludes, therefore, that: «So coherence is the sign of truth, but its cause is the will of God, and its formal reason is that God perceives something to be the best or most harmonious (*harmonicwtaton*), i.e., that something is pleasing to God. So divine pleasure itself, so to speak, is the existence of things»¹⁶.

14 *De Libertate, Fato, Gratia Dei*, ca. 1686–87, A VI 4: 1604–1605. The same anti-Epicurean argument, together with the example of a whole library produced by the casual combination of atoms, had already been proposed in a text from the beginning of the 1680s; see the dialogue *Conversation du Marquis de Pianese et du Pere Emery eremite*, ca. 1681, A VI 4: 2268–2269; cf. also Leibniz to Fontenelle, April 1703, A II 4: 166.

15 A VI 4:1467 (translated in Garber 2009: 287, italics mine).

16 *Corpus non est Substantia sed Modus tantum Entis sive Apparentia Cohaerens*, ca.1689–90, A VI 4: 1637 (LoC 261, translation modified). The dating of this text proposed by the Academy editors is contested by Arthur (LoC 416, note 2), who suggests it was written immediately after the Paris period. Adams too (1994: 236) believes that it should be dated to no later than 1679. Garber (2009: 288), by contrast, accepts the dating of the Academy edition. Both Adams and Arthur read the last line of the text following the version printed in the *Voraussetzung*: «*Itaque ipsa ut ita dicam voluntas divina est rerum existentia*», whereas in A VI 4: 1637, it reads as follows: «*Itaque ipsa ut dicam voluptas divina est rerum existentia*». Meanwhile, the manuscript (LH IV, 1,

To say that «coherence is the sign of truth» expresses the same meaning as that behind what Leibniz had already written in 1676, namely, that «consistent sensations are the mark of existence». Whereas coherence is just the sign or the *mark* of the existence of things, he adds, moreover, that its *cause* has to be identified with the will of God. Finally, he also adds that the “formal reason” of God’s will is something being perceived by God as being the best or the most harmonious¹⁷.

The expression *ratio formalis* is a sort of technical term in the scholastic jargon, primarily related to the question of abstracts and connotative terms¹⁸. Generally speaking, it was commonly employed to refer to the essence, nature, or *quiddity* of something¹⁹. In this context, Leibniz is not looking, however, for something like a nature or essence of existence (a similar idea, indeed, will always be resisted by him and for good reasons)²⁰. Reference to something like the “formal reason” of existence is a clue to the fact that Leibniz is not concerned here with the extension but, rather, with the intension of the concept of existence. In this context, in particular, talking of a “formal reason” can be interpreted as something like an explanatory reason (something which answers to a *why*-question)²¹.

The formal reason in this sense, then, is the reason which explains *why* God created just this world, and Leibniz’s answer is that he did it because he perceived

14b, Bl. 1v) has *voluptas*, a reading which also makes sense with what Leibniz has written a few lines above: «*formalis ratio est quod Deus percipit aliquid optimum esse seu harmonicotaton, sive quod aliquid Deo placeat*» (emphasis mine). Other passages in support of this reading will be provided in what follows below.

- 17 See, earlier, *De Existentia*, Dec. 1676: «So for things to exist is the same as for them to be understood by God to be the best, i.e., the most harmonious» (A VI 3: 588/DSR 113); cf. Schneider (1974): 208–216.
- 18 See A VI 4: 570, 987. In this sense, *ratio formalis* can be taken as a synonym of *formalitas*, *modus concipiendi* or *modus considerandi*; cf. the list of Leibnizian passages provided by Nuchelmans (1986: 224).
- 19 See *Entretien de Philarète et d’Ariste*, 1713: «But in metaphysics, what is needed are essential attributes, or those taken from what is called a formal reason» (GP VI 584/AG 261).
- 20 Cf. *De Veritatibus Primis*, ca. 1680, A VI 4: 1443n: «If existence were something else than a certain essence’s demand, it would follow that existence itself has some essence or adds something new to things, about which it could be asked again whether this essence exists or not, and why this rather than another one» (the marginal note, however, can be a posterior addition to the main text).
- 21 This seems to be the sense in which Leibniz uses this term in a passage from the *Discourse*, where he takes the distance from the theological perspective of those «who maintain that there are no rules of goodness and perfection in the nature of things [...] and who say that the works of God are good solely for the formal reason that God has made them» (§2, A VI 4: 1532/AG 36); see also *Meditation on the Common Concept of Justice*, 1702–3, where he claims that «power is not the formal reason which makes [something] just. [...] Otherwise, if power were the formal reason of justice, all powerful persons would be just, each in proportion to his power [...]. It is thus a question of finding this formal reason, that is to say, the *why* of this attribute, or this concept which should teach us what justice is [...].» (A IV 10: 13/PW 48). Cf. A IV 10: 12: «*Il s’agit donc de trouver cette raison formelle, c’est à dire le pourquoi de cet attribut*».

it as the best or the most harmonious. The same view is also stated elsewhere: «The formal reason of the existence of contingent things seems to be that it pleases the necessary being (*Formalis ratio existentiae rerum contingentium videtur esse Enti necessario placere*)» (ca. 1680–84, A VI 4: 1460). In another passage he says: «For we cannot know the true formal reason of existence in any particular case, since it involves a regress into infinity (*Quia non possumus cognoscere veram rationem formalem existentiae, in ullo casu speciali, involvit enim progressum in infinitum*)» (ca. 1689, A VI 4: 1651).

These two passages, however, are not in conflict: we cannot know the formal reason of existence in any special case, namely, we cannot know why this thing rather than another belongs to the best possible world (why Judas-the-sinner etc.), since this would involve an infinite analysis, i.e., a comparison between infinitely many possible worlds. On the other hand, however, he can say that the formal reason for existence is that being the best (or the most harmonious) is what pleases God and, thus, drives him to create that particular world. To look for a formal reason for existence, of course, makes sense only from the point of view of what I called the *a priori* account of existence.

In the passage quoted above, Leibniz concludes that «divine pleasure itself, so to speak, is the existence of things». This cannot be interpreted at face value, as the “so to speak” clause clearly suggests. Leibniz, indeed, does not mean that the existence of things is the same as God’s pleasure, and nor is he defending the claim (perhaps more convincing) that the existence of things is what pleases God. Taken literally, indeed, the latter claim would make no sense at all; it must not be taken as a definition of existence in the proper sense.

The conclusion therefore follows that what is contained in the concept of actual things (or the actual world) is *not* actual existence properly said (which would be absurd), but, rather, those factors which made those things (or that world) existence-worthy or, which is the same, eligible by God. One might have the impression that Leibniz is advancing as an explanation of existence what is actually only an explanation of what it is to be worthy of existence²².

To look for the reasons or the factors which moved God to create (or actualize) this world perfectly fits with Leibniz’s attempt to solve the general question of theodicy. In a theodicean context, indeed, the question, “Why this world?”, does not concern the meaning of “actuality” in a proper sense (i.e., the distinction between the possible and the actual), but is explicitly addressed to investigate the reasons which have led God to act in a way that, at first sight, seems to be non-optimal, given something like the presence of evil in this world.

22 This would be in keeping with an axiological theory of actuality, such as that which Adams dubs an “optimistic theory of actuality”; cf. Adams (1974), where existence is treated as a value property.

8.5. Two Views on Existence and Contingency

Let me come back once again to the text of *De Natura Veritatis, Contingentiae et Indifferentiae* (ca. 1685–86):

There are some propositions which pertain to the essences, and others to the existence of things. Propositions of essence are those which can be demonstrated by the resolution of terms; these are necessary, or virtually identical, and so their opposite is impossible, or virtually contradictory. The truth of these is eternal; not only will they hold whilst the world remains, but they would have held even if God had created the world in another way. Existential or contingent propositions are entirely different from these. Their truth is understood *a priori* by the infinite mind alone, and cannot be demonstrated by any resolution. These propositions are such as are true at a certain time; they express not only what pertains to the possibility of things, but also what actually exists, or would exist contingently if certain things were granted – for example, that I am now alive, or that the sun is shining (A VI 4: 1517).

First of all, one must pay attention to the distinction between essential and existential properties, both of which are included in the complete notion of an individual: «I believe that this complete notion of Peter which God contemplates contains not only essential or necessary properties, which derive from incomplete or specific notions [...] but also, so to say, existential properties, that is, contingent ones» (A VI 4: 1600).

Here “existential” does not refer only to what exists in the actual world, but also to what could have existed: namely, possible individuals. As Leibniz says in the passage above, existential propositions «express not only what pertains to the possibility of things, but also what actually exists, or would exist contingently if certain things were granted». See also the following passage from Leibniz’s *Meditationes Pacatae de Praedestinatione et Gratia* (ca. 1701–6): «For creatures in the realm of possibility are conceived by God’s understanding in a conditional way, together with the circumstances that would belong to them if they were posited into existence» (A IV 3: 627–628)²³.

This line of thinking connects also to the way in which Leibniz presents the distinction between necessary and contingent truths (or propositions): necessary truths are eternal and «they would have held even if God had created the world in another way». From our perspective, this formulation closely resembles

23 Cf. Leibniz’s remarks on Twisse (ca. 1695): «There are certain indemonstrable truths even concerning possibles, namely with respect to contingent things considered as possible (*Sunt quaedam veritates indemonstrabiles etiam in possibilibus, nempe circa contingentia spectata ut possibilia*)» (Grua 353). See also Grua 354: «The complete notion of an individual embraces both essential and the existential [predicates] (*Notio completa individui complectitur tam essentialia quam existentialia*)». On the persistence of the account of substance based on the complete notion in the late Leibniz, see Nachtomy–Ottaviani (2025).

the idea that necessary truths are those which are true in every possible world, whilst contingent truths are those which are truths only in some possible worlds²⁴. One can notice, however, that this is not exactly what Leibniz is saying in the passage above. In his discussion of Foucher's criticism of Malebranche, for example, Leibniz discusses the status of mathematical truths (which are the typical example of eternal truths). In particular, he emphasizes that the truth of mathematical propositions does not depend on the existence of things outside us, to the extent that they would generally be valid for someone who is asleep as well as for someone who is awake²⁵. And in a letter to the Electress Sophie, Leibniz notes that the truths of reason are true for God as well as for an angel and for us, i.e., for any kind of intellect whatsoever. He then adds that: «These eternal truths are the fixed and immutable point on which everything turns (*Ces vérités éternelles sont le point fixe et immuable, sur lequel tout roule*)» (August 1696, Grua 379/LTS 123).

These texts show an unmistakable Platonic flavour, especially as far as the question of the priority between truth(s) and world(s) is concerned. In other words, Leibniz would have never subscribed to the view that mathematical propositions are necessary *because* they are true of – or in – any possible world, but he would rather say that they are true in every possible (i.e., creatable) world just *because* they are necessary. This point has to be connected with the distinction between the level of essences (in the general sense) and that of possible individuals (or individual essences), upon which I will focus in the next chapter.

In this sense, it is impossible to deny that, from what Leibniz explicitly writes, necessity should be understood as «what is true independently of [possible worlds]», or what is contained in God's intellect before any consideration of his will. In other words, «to understand necessity one must not start with individuals and their properties, but, as with Plato, with essences and their properties»²⁶. As far as I can see, the Platonist strand is mainly emphasized when Leibniz

24 Commenting on this passage, Benson Mates notes: «there is the presumption, almost never stated explicitly but always visible in the background, that a necessary truth is a proposition true of all possible worlds, so that a contingent truth will be a proposition true of the actual world but false of at least one of the other possible worlds» (Mates 1986: 107). On the notion of necessity in Leibniz, see especially Wilson (1976) and (2020).

25 «Whether they exist outside us or within us, these perfect consecutions will always be true for a man who sleeps just as much as for a man who is awake (*Soit qu'il y en aye hors de nous soit, qu'il y en ait dans nous, ces parfaites suites seront toujours vraies à l'égard d'un homme qui dort aussi bien que d'un homme qui veille*)» (A VI 3: 312 fn4). Concerning the lack of existential import of mathematical propositions, cf. also Leibniz's late remarks on Stegmann: «But the question of the essence is one thing, that of existence is another. When the essence of the circle is known to us [...], we enquire afterwards about existence, by applying this definition to some given figure, which is claimed to be a circle, and thus we find out about the existence of a circle, i.e., whether it exists or not» (Jolley 1975: 181).

26 Vailati (1986: 210). For some Platonic elements in Leibniz, see my analysis of the discussion with Gabriel Wagner in the next chapter; cf. also Poli (2010).

focuses on eternal truths, especially when he deals with mathematical objects, for mathematical objects and propositions are regarded by him as some sort of Platonic archetype which can only partially be approximated by concrete objects in the actual world. Instead, a nominalist or conceptualist strand prevails when the possibility of individuals and alternative possible worlds is taken into consideration.

8.6. A Twofold Account of Eternal Truths

One interpretative problem is presented, however, by the fact that Leibniz seems to take “eternal truths” both in a broad and in a narrow sense. In the narrow sense, they just include necessary truths concerning abstract and general essences, whilst in the broad sense they also include all kinds of truths about what is possible, i.e., what, in the passages quoted above, he considers as contingent truths. The latter seems to be Leibniz’s favourite way of looking at the question of eternal truths from the point of view of his theodicy, because it explains that the origin of evil has to be found in the natures of things which are completely independent of God’s will²⁷. This is the theodicean root of Leibniz’s superessentialism, which I have already mentioned in passing in the preceding chapters.

This is particularly evident in those passages in which he draws a contrast between his own position and that upheld by the Cartesian theory as it relates to the creation of eternal truths; see, for instance, his letter to Burnett on 29 December 1707: «*l’idée de ce monde comme possible ne laisse pas d’être éternelle et nécessaire*» (GP III 315). From this, one may naturally be drawn to the conclusion that everything which is possible is necessarily so, or, which is the same, that there is no contingency in the realm of what is purely possible²⁸.

Sometimes Leibniz states that «all truths that concern possibles or essences and the impossibility of a thing or its necessity (that is, the impossibility of its contrary) rest on the principle of contradiction; all truths concerning contingent things or the existence of things, rest on the principle of perfection» (*De Libertate et Necessitate*, ca. 1680–84, A VI 4: 1445/AG 19). When talking of “truths concerning possibles or essences”, however, it is not clear in this passage (as elsewhere) that Leibniz truly means individual essences (or possible individuals) and not just general essences. It is not difficult to find passages in which Leibniz takes the distinction between “essential” and “existential” as

²⁷ See Rateau (2019: 245–258).

²⁸ Cf. Russell (1992: 30). As evidence of Leibniz’s commitment to this view, Russell quotes a passage from §21 of the *Theodicy*, where Leibniz says that the region of eternal truths (i.e., necessary ones) contains «all possibilities» and, for this reason, «it is necessary that there be an infinitude of possible worlds» (GP VI 115/H 139); cf. Leibniz’s 1704 letter to Jacquelot, GP VI 559, where he points out that the whole series of things is determined neither by God’s foreknowledge nor by his decree but from the simple understanding (*scientia simplicis intelligentiae*) of the possibles in God’s understanding.

synonymous with the distinction between “necessary” and “contingent”, even though the context clarifies that the essential (or necessary) properties are only the general ones (i.e., those that can be derived from the incomplete notions), and the existential (or contingent) properties are the accidental ones²⁹.

Consider the following passage from section 52 of the *Theodicy*:

Since [...] God’s decree consists solely in the resolution he forms, after having compared all possible worlds, to choose that one which is the best, and bring it into existence together with all that this world contains [...], it is plain to see that this decree changes nothing in the constitution of things: God leaves them just as they were in the state of mere possibility, that is, *changing nothing either in their essence or nature, nor even in their accidents, which are represented perfectly already in the idea of this possible world.* (GP VI 131/H 154–155, italics mine)

Paradoxical though it could be, this approach is meant by Leibniz as a defence of the existence of contingent facts and events, because, if God’s actual decree does not change anything in the constitution of things as they are at the level of mere possibilities, that which is contingent and free (i.e., only hypothetically necessary) at the level of possibility will also be contingent and free at the level of actuality. Leibniz seems to suggest, in other words, that there is a sense in which the distinction between what is necessary and what is contingent can be placed at the level of what is purely possible³⁰.

Pressed by Arnauld’s objections on this point, Leibniz will make it clear that the connection between, e.g., Adam and his posterity (and, indirectly, all other events in human history) has to be taken as “intrinsic” but not “necessary”: the connection between Adam (taken as possible) and his posterity is independent from God’s will (i.e., from his actual decree) but not from God’s free decrees taken as possible. In a well-known passage, Leibniz replies to Arnauld that «the concepts of individual substances, which are complete and suffice to distinguish their subjects completely [...], must also enclose in their concept *taken as possible*, the free decrees of God, *also viewed as possible*». It has to be so because, contrary

29 As Adams (1994: 45), has pointed out, these texts clearly employ a broad sense of “existential” together with a narrow sense of “essential”, especially if compared with the sense in which all properties contained in the complete concept of an individual are essential to him. Conversely, the superessentialist reading emphasizes a narrow sense of existence (which amounts to actuality as the instantiation of complete concepts) together with a broad sense of essence. On the distinction between two senses of “essential”, see also Mondadori (1985: 168ff).

30 In the remarks on Twisse, Leibniz repeats the idea that the proposition “this world is the best” is true but not necessary, because it cannot be demonstrated *a priori*. Then he adds: «So then, is it contingent? Or rather *contingential*, as in the case of those things which in fact do not occur, that is, possible contingents (*Ergone contingens? An potius contingentialis, ut in iis quae reapse non contingunt seu contingentibus possibilibus*)» (Grua 351). This is the only passage I know where Leibniz distinguishes between *contingens* and *contingentialis*, where the latter term is coined to refer only to those things which are contingently possible but not actualized.

to general species or essences in the traditional sense, complete concepts of individuals «enclose contingent truths or truths of fact, and individual circumstances of time, place, etc»³¹, which are existential properties (in the sense clarified above). In other words, the possibility of individuals (when contrasted with the possibility of general essences) presupposes the possibility of their causes, which, in turn, presupposes the free decrees of God taken as possible³².

It is not entirely clear if such an explanation is in keeping with what Leibniz says elsewhere, i.e., that the entire series of things taken as possible is the object of God's understanding, in the sense of his *scientia simplicis intelligentiae*, which, according to the theological tradition, was taken as necessary and pre-volitional (i.e., completely independent from God's will)³³. Different conclusions concerning the notion of existence follow, however, depending on which of these two horns of the dilemma you prefer to place the emphasis.

If you decide, for instance, to emphasize Leibniz's tendency to affirm the absolute independence of *possibilia* from God's decree (be it actual or merely possible), then you will incline to accept the idea that existence must be considered as a very special predicate (if a predicate at all), since it must be excluded from the predicates contained in (and derivable from) the complete notion of an individual. Since existence (or possible non-existence) is the only contingent feature an individual (or a world) has, it must be excluded from the number of those properties which are contained in the complete notion or the essence of an individual. Otherwise, indeed, given the necessitating connection between an individual and its properties, it would follow also that the existence of the group of complete concepts that constitute the actual world (or the actual world itself) is necessary³⁴.

On the other hand, if you decide to hang the emphasis on the second horn of the dilemma, privileging Leibniz's claim that possible individuals (or, better still, complete individual concepts taken as possible) involve possible decrees, you would probably like to find a place for contingency within the complete concept, or in the connection between the subject and its predicates, and, thus, the inclusion of existence (or something which works as a proxy of existence at

31 Leibniz to Arnauld, July 14, 1686 (A II 2: 71/L 332, italics mine).

32 A II 2: 72–73/L 333. For two opposed readings of this passage, cf. Mondadori (1993: 169), and Adams (1994: 30–34); cf. also Sleight (1990: 48–94), and Di Bella (2005a: 265–299).

33 Cf. the very beginning of *De Natura Veritatis, Contingentiae et Indifferentiae*, A VI 4: 1515.

34 «The possibility or the notion of a created mind, indeed, does not involve existence» (A VI 4: 1522). Of course, this seems to be at odds with the claim (stated by Leibniz in the very same text; see A VI 4: 1515) that the conceptual containment theory of truth holds in the case of *all* propositions (necessary as well as contingent, universal as well as singular); cf. also *De Libertate et Gratia*, ca. 1680–84, A VI 4: 1457–1458, where Leibniz repeats that propositions having eternal truths have no existential import («non agitur de existentia») since they are only hypothetical. From this it follows that «no absolute [i.e., non-hypothetical] proposition, with the only exception of that which follows the nature of God, is necessary, and there is no being which exists necessarily or by its own essence, with the only exception of God».

the level of essences) in the complete concept will not make trouble any longer. A virtue of this second account is that it allows you to safeguard the integrity of Leibniz's commitment to conceptual containment as a definition of truth, i.e., as a condition both necessary and sufficient for any proposition to be true. Moreover, it seems to be in keeping with those passages in which Leibniz explicitly speaks of "contingent possibles"³⁵.

I will return to these questions in the next chapter, where I will try to show that it is possible to make sense of some of the (alleged) ambiguities related to Leibniz's treatment of the notion of existence. For the time being, suffice it to say that much of the discrepancy between these two accounts can be traced back to certain presuppositions which are not always explicitly stated in the scholarship, like the idea that an account of necessary and contingent truths in terms of possible worlds is (implicitly or explicitly) accepted by Leibniz.

In my discussion above, I have pointed out that there is an ambiguity in the way Leibniz refers to eternal truths, because they can be understood either in a narrow or in a broad sense. A somewhat similar distinction seems to have been outlined by Leibniz himself in the following passage, taken from a short note tentatively dated to between 1683 and 1685:

The whole body of sciences obtains its certain division from nature itself: for our cognition is either directed towards pure concepts and eternal truths, or towards the confused perceptions of those things which we observe to take place. The former arises from the innate concepts of our mind alone and deals with the essence or the possibility of things. The latter requires sensible experience and deals with those things which are *de facto* and actually exist. God alone is able to know all things from himself in a distinct and *a priori* way as if they were eternal truths (*per modum aeternae veritatis*). (A VI 4: 524)

Leibniz starts with the twofold nature of our cognition, i.e., the distinction between truths of reason which are directed towards the "essence or the possibility of things", and truths of fact, which deal with what is *contingent* in the

35 See GP III 50: «The knowledge of the possibles is called knowledge of simple intelligence (*simplicis intelligentiae*), and embraces also the reciprocal connections between them and, thus, all necessary truths. It embraces also the contingent possibles and their reciprocal connections, and, thus, also the conditional futures, namely what would have followed from a given contingent thing, and also if in this kind of connection there is no necessity but contingency, so much that some call it middle knowledge, it should be properly included under the knowledge of simple intelligence»; cf. GP VI 440. In both cases, the expression "contingent possibles" is employed to capture the object of what the Jesuits called "middle knowledge" (*scientia media*), which, according to Leibniz, must not be considered as an autonomous kind of knowledge. On this topic, see Mondadori (1994b); Griffin (2013:145–164). In other passages, however, the object of middle knowledge is clearly indicated as "conditioned existences" (see A VI 4: 1515). If, as I suspect, "contingent possibles" are the same as "conditioned existences", then what Leibniz has in mind here is just an existential characterization of possibility which has to be carefully distinguished from the essential one; see Chapter 9 below.

sense of what is factual and is said to actually exist. When moving to God's point of view, however, both these classes of truths are said to be known by him as if they were eternal truths. The first perspective corresponds to the distinction between analytic and synthetic propositions; the divine perspective, on the contrary, seems to make the distinction itself completely useless³⁶.

God's point of view corresponds to a sort of semantic holism (in the Quinean sense), where the distinction between dictionary and encyclopaedia makes no sense at all: a complete concept is an encyclopaedic voice, recapitulating the whole history of an individual, but is known by God as a dictionary voice. The first account of eternal truths, then, draws a dividing line between the domain of general essences (or abstract terms) and that of individuals (actual as well as possible), which are the counterpart of things (*res*). The second, by contrast, takes together truths about abstract possibilities and truths about possible individuals, in order to distinguish between the domain of the "possible" and that of the "actual" (the actual world).

36 In this sense, Belaval (1993: 210) has noted that in the ontology of God's understanding there is no right to discern between analysis and synthesis. An essence is not analytically predicable of a thing if not through the synthesis of those relationships which individuate it (i.e., which make that an individual one).

Chapter 9. The Puzzle of Existence and Leibniz's Mature Account of Possibility

9.1. *Constantia subjecti*

In a well-known passage of the *New Essays*, Leibniz once again states the conditional nature of eternal truths, but he also draws a peculiar distinction between conditional and hypothetical propositions:

As for “eternal truths”, it must be understood that fundamentally they are all conditional; they say, in effect: given so and so, such and such is the case. For instance, when I say: *Any figure which has three sides will also have three angles*, I am saying nothing more than that given that there is a figure with three sides that same figure will have three angles. I say “that same”, which is the respect in which categorical propositions, which can be stated unconditionally although they are fundamentally conditional, differ from those we call “hypothetical”. An example of the latter would be the proposition: *If a figure has three sides, its angles are equal to two right angles*; we can see that here the “antecedent” (i.e., *The figure is three-sided*) and the “consequent” (i.e., *The angles of the three-sided figure are equal to two right angles*) do not have the same subject. Whereas in the former case, in which the antecedent was *This figure is three-sided* and the consequent was *The figure in question has three angles*, they did have the same subject. Though hypotheticals too can often be transformed into categoricals, by modifying their terms a little. For instance, in place of the foregoing hypothetical, I could say: *The angles of every three-sided figure are equal to two right angles*. (NE IV, xi, §13, A VI 6: 447)

From the terminological point of view, Leibniz sometimes distinguishes between categorical and hypothetical propositions and, at other times, between absolute and conditional propositions. There seems to be no substantial difference between these two conceptual couples. The passage above is the only one I know where Leibniz introduces a difference between conditional propositions (those of the form: *If S is P, then S is R*) and hypothetical propositions (those of the form: *If A is B, then C is D*), where the main difference consists in the fact that the identity of the subject is preserved in the case of conditional propositions, but not in the case of hypothetical ones¹. He also adds that in many cases a hypothetical proposition can be transformed into a categorical one, by modifying the terms².

1 This distinction has usually been neglected by readers; for an exception, see Rauzy (2006).

2 Note that the hypothetical proposition “If a figure has three angles, then its angles are equal to two right ones” seems to constitute a case of a conditional which encapsulates an inference *a rectis ad obliqua*, i.e., from a statement in the nominative case (“A figure has three

Emphasis on the identity of the subject may be partially explained by the fact that this passage immediately precedes the very well-known paragraph where Leibniz introduces the question *de constantia subjecti*, which, however, does not primarily refer to the logical identity of the subject in a proposition, but, as Leibniz notes, to the question of «how a proposition can have a real truth if the subject does not exist». Then he goes on to explain the ground of the conditional proposition in terms of the connection between its terms:

[1] The answer is that its truth is a merely conditional one, saying that if the subject ever does exist it will be found to be thus and so. But then the question arises: What is the basis for this connection? For it must have a basis, since the conditional proposition contains a reality that does not mislead. [2] The reply to this second question is that the connection is based on the linking together of ideas. Final question: Where would these ideas be if there were no mind? What would then become of the real foundation of this? [...] This question brings us at last to [3] the ultimate foundation of truth, namely to God, the supreme and universal mind who cannot fail to exist and whose understanding is indeed the domain of eternal truths. (A VI 6: 447, numbers added)

In this passage Leibniz treats two distinct (but interrelated) questions: the answers 1 and 2, indeed, concern the problem of the basis or the ground of truth; the last one 3, on the contrary, concerns the reality of truth³. Leibniz's strategy in 1 and 2 faithfully follows Suárez's two-steps solution to the problem of eternal truths that I have already discussed in Chapter 2 above. Now I intend to focus directly on Leibniz's solution to the third question above, i.e., the foundation of the reality of truths in the mind of God.

To further elucidate this point, I will focus on Leibniz's discussion with Gabriel Wagner, which took place between the end of 1697 and the spring of 1698. This discussion is interesting, among many other things, because Wagner expresses a full-fledged nominalist view, together with a strong physicalist and materialist position, against which Leibniz forcefully pushed back⁴.

angles”) to one in a case different from nominative, in particular (in this case) genitive (“The angles of a figure with three angles are equal to two right angles”). This argument is one of those which are not reducible to the classical form of syllogism, as Leibniz remarks in another passage in the *New Essays*, IV, xvii, §4, A VI 6: 479. There, indeed, he says that «there are *valid non-syllogistic inferences* which cannot be rigorously demonstrated in any syllogism unless the terms are changed a little, and this altering of the terms is the non-syllogistic inference», as in the case of the following: “If Jesus Christ is God, then the mother of Jesus Christ is the mother of God”. (“Inference” translates what Leibniz calls *consequence*, or, in Latin, *consequentia*, which, however, is explicitly formulated as a conditional). On the inference *a rectis ad obliqua*, see Mugnai (1990b: 61–65).

3 On this point, see Mugnai (1990a).

4 On the details of Leibniz's relationship and discussions with Gabriel Wagner, and the editions of these texts, see Ottaviani–Arthur (2021), and also the commentary on a selection

9.2. Divine Ideas: Leibniz's Discussion with Gabriel Wagner (1697-98)

One of the most interesting points of divergence between Leibniz and Wagner is the way in which the former, to contrast Wagner's physicalism, is led to emphasize the Platonic strand of his own philosophy.

Wagner objects to Leibniz, for instance, that «[t]he existence of the world is prior to our concepts; therefore, the latter follow from the former, not the contrary» (A II 3: 677), where Wagner is referring, of course, to the concepts in our mind. Leibniz replies that «The very same possibility of them [our concepts] is prior to it [the existence of the world] by nature or reason, because it is the reason or the origin of the world (*Sed horum possibilitas est prior illa, natura seu ratione, cum sit ratio illius vel origo*)» (A II 3: 677 fn16). In other words, he states that «the possibility of both our concepts and the very same things is originally or naturally prior to the existence of the world», because essences (possibilities) are naturally prior to existence, and existences (or “physical truths” or “temporal” ones) follow from «the laws of essence, i.e., metaphysical or geometrical truths, i.e., in one word, eternal truths» (A II 3: 680–681)⁵.

One of Wagner's objections is directed against the notion of “metaphysical possibility”, which he took as synonymous with a merely mental possibility, with nothing real corresponding to it:

Things and the possibility of things are simultaneous, since things are eternal, and there can be nothing having a genuine possibility prior to what is eternal. However, the possibility of our concepts is by far posterior to them [things], because our concepts physically and metaphysically depend on things: for our concepts are modelled on the things from which they flow, or, at least, must be modelled on them. The connection between concepts arises from the connection between the things which are perceived. [...] Metaphysical possibility, except that which posits something physical, is a bare fiction, which can exist only in the concept, not in act or in reality. [...] Essence is not prior to existence, nor is the essence of something the origin of its own existence, but is a concept of already existing things, and, therefore, is posterior or, at least, simultaneous to existent things, and both of them are eternal. (A II 3: 687–688)

Leibniz replies to each point of this passage. Against Wagner's eternalism first of all, he distinguishes between the eternity of essences, or the metaphysical possibility of things, and the temporal nature of things. He also adds

of passages from Leibniz's discussion with Wagner translated in Arthur–Ottaviani (2025: 234–250).

5 Cf. the contemporary text *De Rerum Originatione Radicali* (23 November 1697): «In order to explain a bit more distinctly how temporal, contingent, or physical truths arise from eternal, essential or metaphysical truths, we must first acknowledge that since something rather than nothing exists, there is a certain urge for existence [...]» (GP VII 303/AG 150). On the theory of the striving possibles, see below.

that, when talking of the possibility of the concepts, he means the “objective possibility, like in the case of numbers” (A II 3: 687)⁶. And, against Wagner’s claim that the connection of concepts arises from the connection of perceived things, Leibniz answers: «The connection among concepts arises from the connection among possible objects, i.e., ideas (*Connexio conceptuum oritur ex connexione objectorum possibilium, seu idearum*)» (A II 3: 687–688).

The most extensive remark, however, is dedicated to a rebuttal of Wagner’s claim that concepts are in every case posterior to things. To this, Leibniz replies that, on the contrary, «mutable things receive their rule of existence from eternal essences (*res mutabiles legem existendi ab essentiis aeternis accipiunt*), as natural phenomena follow geometrical and mechanical laws» (A II 3: 687). This, he says, is a clue to the conclusion that essences are (naturally) prior to existences:

For eternal or necessary truths, such as those of metaphysics and geometry, do not arise from the observation of things or experiments, otherwise they would be proved through induction and not through demonstration; on the contrary, they depend on ideas alone, i.e., on definitions and identical axioms [i.e., identities]. And, nonetheless, existing things follow these laws everywhere. The status of things changes continually, but the laws of change are eternal and depend on an immutable thing. (A II 3: 687)

The most interesting passage, however, is to be found in the discussion from March 1698, when Wagner, attacking once more the idea of metaphysical possibility, asserts that: «General and abstract things derive from individuals, not the other way around. To deduce the latter from the former is Aristotle’s mistake, and thus metaphysics is posterior to physics» (A II 3: 705). Wagner’s nominalism is consequent on his idea that metaphysics is subordinate to physics and not the other way around. Wagner is endorsing here a full-fledged nominalist position: there is nothing over and above individuals (i.e., actual ones), therefore abstract things derive from individuals through a process of abstraction.

Leibniz’s reply is quite articulate and deserves to be quoted in full:

I acknowledge that abstract, general things and possibilities arise from the individual, which is complete and actual. And, nonetheless, it is still true that actual and complete individual things, namely things that are physical or capable of being acted upon (*physica seu passibilia*), should be derived from the laws of the general and abstract (or metaphysical-mathematical) possibilities, that is from eternal truths or ideas. For those abstract things are rooted in the primary actual individual substance, i.e., God, from which all the other things flow according to those ideal laws. God and the world are completely different. God is a monad,

6 Leibniz also stresses that metaphysical possibility would be a fiction only if it were not grounded in something actually existing, i.e., in God as the primary monad (see A II 3: 688). In this case, see too the parallel passage in *De Rerum Originatione Radicali* (GP VII 304–305/AG 151).

i.e., something indivisible, and not only actual things but also possibilities emanate from him. The world is an aggregate of many substances, and it exhibits only one among all the possible series of things. (A II 3: 705)

As far as actual things are concerned, Leibniz shares Wagner's particularism: the only actually existing things are individuals (i.e., complete beings), and both abstract entities (general, incomplete, etc.) and possibilities are obtained by abstraction from the individual ones. However, when moving from the point of view of the actual world to that, so to speak, of God before the creation of the world, Leibniz's opinion is an altogether different one: possibilities are not abstracted from the created world, but flow instead from the (divine) mind in the very same process of creating the world⁷.

A point which is not entirely clear is what Leibniz has in mind when he says that complete and actual individual things derive from «the laws of the general and abstract (or metaphysical-mathematical) possibilities». The ambiguity concerns the scope of eternal truths or ideas (or, which is the same, metaphysical-mathematical laws). If we take ideas as covering also ideas of individuals (i.e., individual concepts), then eternal truths and metaphysical-mathematical laws cannot be restricted to necessary truths only; since, according to Leibniz, both necessary and contingent properties are contained in the concept of an individual. In this sense, the laws of possibilities can be said to be “general and abstract” in an improper way only, since a complete individual concept is not general and makes abstraction from existence only.

It seems, therefore, more natural to read the reference to “laws of possibilities *etc.*” in a more restricted sense, i.e., as general and abstract laws concerning (general) essences, to be contrasted with individual and concrete laws concerning existent things. In other words, Leibniz does not want to maintain that possibilities (as well as abstract entities) are totally independent of any actually existing thing. He wants to maintain, however, that they are independent from (or, better still, prior to) actually existing created beings. When saying that they are derived from eternal truths, Leibniz means therefore that they are grounded in «the primary actual singular substance», i.e., in God, the one and only necessarily existing being. In this way, the *reality* (the ontological status) of possibilities and abstract entities (interpreted as ideal ones) is prior to the actual world, but not prior to God himself; their very reality, indeed, is grounded in (and dependent on) the actual existence of God's mind.

7 Cf. also A II 3: 709, where, against Wagner's claim that «The existence of singular things is not posterior to their essence (*Singularium existentia non est posterior singularium essentia*)», Leibniz replies: «Also God is a singular thing, but one which virtually contains all things. Therefore, it should be said so: the existence of imperfect things is posterior to their essence, or, which is the same, the idea contained in the existence of the perfect substance (*Etiam Deus est res singularis sed virtute universa continens. Sic ergo dicendum: imperfectorum existentia est posterior essentia eorum seu idea contenta in Existentia Substantiae perfectae*)».

In the same March 1698 text, Wagner claims that «the world is prior by nature [to essence or possibility], because those same possibilities are *abstractions of the mind* derived from the world itself». In his discussions with Leibniz in 1698, Wagner very candidly acknowledges that God and the world, for him, are one and the same thing; this results in a metaphysics that is (like Spinoza's) necessitarian. Leibniz, of course, strongly rejects Wagner's (Spinozist) identification of God and the world.

Against Wagner's claim that the world is prior by nature to essence or possibility, Leibniz replies in the following way:

Ideas or possibilities which are in God are prior by nature to the world, as the art of the artist is prior to his work. Therefore, possibilities are not abstracted by the mind from an already constituted world, but, rather, they are overflowing from the mind in the constitution of the world (*non sunt mente abstractae a mundo constituto, sed potius ex mente prorumpentes in mundum constituendum*). (A II 3: 706)

Speaking of the ideas or possibilities as *in Deo existentes* (which I rendered as «which are in God»), Leibniz is not ascribing any ontological independence to *possibilia* or essences. In his 1675 letter to Foucher, he had chosen the example of a geometrical figure, like the circle: «the nature of the circle with its properties is something which exists and is eternal (*quelque chose d'existant et d'eternel*)» (A II 1²: 388).

Again, in the *Notationes Generales*, one of the most important texts preceding the *Discourse*, Leibniz writes as follows: «And every possible thing does not involve only possibility, but also a tendency to actual existence, not as if those things which do not exist had a tendency, but because this is required by the ideas of the essences which actually exist in God (*ideae essentiarum in Deo actu existentes*)» (A VI 4: 557)⁸. “Existence”, in this context, must not be taken as referring to actual existence, but as a way just to remark and emphasize the difference between genuine essences (“real” ones) and merely fictional objects («possibility [...] is not a chimera which we create»). The existence of essences, in this sense, would just mean that they have a genuine (non-fictional) ontological status⁹.

8 This passage has been regarded by Mondadori as an (exceptional) example of a stronger view, according to which essences (or, better still, divine ideas which stand for essences) do exist in God not just “objectively” (in the sense of “objective being”) but also actually (in the sense of their “formal being”), and, therefore, are to be really (and not just conceptually) distinguished from God. Cf. Mondadori (1995: 178). There is a way of providing a deflationary interpretation of this passage: when talking of ideas as “actually existing” in God, indeed, Leibniz is just pointing out (admittedly, in a very misleading way) that God's understanding of essences is never in potency but always in act (in contrast with ideas in the human mind, which have a dispositional nature); on this point, see Mondadori's review of Mates' book (Mondadori 1990b).

9 About the status of geometrical figures, cf. a text dated around 1696: «It can be judged from the example of the figure, however, that the imagination offers occasions for the intellect, but when the intellect then considers in itself the notion presented to it, it grasps that, with

In the passage against Wagner quoted above, what is particularly interesting, however, is what Leibniz says in the last line, i.e., that possibilities are not an abstraction of the mind, but they flow from the divine mind in the very constitution of the world. Notice that Leibniz does not ascribe to God any knowledge by abstraction, since possibilities (and the same should hold also in the case of general notions) are not abstracted from the created world, but, in some (rather obscure) sense, they are said to flow with force (*prorumpere*) from the divine mind with and by the same act by means of which the world is constituted.

The somewhat Platonic flavour of this solution can be detected from two aspects. First, there is a clear reference to the doctrine of emanative causation, according to which both actual and possible things are said to emanate from God, though not in a necessitarian way as far as actual things are concerned: «This series of actualized possibilities, or the world, emanates from God not in a necessary way, otherwise other series would not be possible, but, nevertheless, by a certain and determinate reason, i.e., that of the greater good» (A II 3: 705)¹⁰.

The second is the comparison between God and an artist (or, also, an architect), and, in particular, between the priority of the essence(s) over existence(s) with the priority of the artist's art over his product, the work of art, where the former operates as a sort of *ideal model* for the production of the latter¹¹. Reference to the sphere of art was typical, moreover, of the theological debates over God as an exemplar cause.

what is absolute being prior to the intellect, limited predicates are nothing but certain modes by which absolute ones vary, and are only understood through the absolute ones. For we do indeed receive through the senses a circle, or rather a kind of adumbration of a circle, for one may never assert that an exact figure of this kind was presented to us in things, or designated by the imagination; whatever this (or something like it) is, however, it provides the occasion for the intellect to investigate the true notion of the circle, so that when it attains this notion, it manifestly sees in it a kind of limitation of extension, and so grasps that the notion of the circle depends on the notion of extension being varied (*Nam circulum quidem, vel potius adumbrationem quandam circuli a sensibus accipimus; neque enim unquam asseverare licet, exactam hujusmodi figuram in rebus nobis fuisse objectam, aut imaginatione designatam; hoc tamen quicquid est, vel affine quiddam, occasionem praebet intellectui veram circuli notionem indagandi, quam ubi attingit, manifeste in ea quandam extensionis limitationem videt adeoque circuli notionem ab extensionis notione variata pendere deprehendi*)» (LH XXXV 7, 10, Bl. 5 r-v, edited and translated in Arthur–Ottaviani 2025: 151).

10 Cf. the passages discussed in Fouke (1994).

11 This metaphor, which dates back to Plato's *Timaeus*, has been employed several times by Leibniz: see A VI 4: 1395, 1536, and 1616, fn1; cf. Schrecker (1951). See also Leinkauf (2009). In a broad sense, Leibniz's Platonism can be summarized by saying that "the intelligible is always prior to the sensible in the ideas of the primary intellect [God], which is the source of things" (Grua 555), a claim Leibniz defends throughout his discussion with Wagner, where he repeatedly states that the essence or the possibility of things is prior to their existence. At other times, the "intelligible world" is that of simple substances (monads) in contrast with the sensible world of phenomena, as in NE IV, iii, §6 (A VI 6: 378). Also in this case, Leibniz refers to the Platonic view that sensible things are transient and in flux.

9.3. Divine Ideas: Exemplars or Representations?

That said, it is still not entirely clear, however, in which way Leibniz understands the claim that possibilities as well as general and abstract entities are derived from God's understanding, or, insofar as they are regarded as ideas, they are to be placed within divine understanding. On this relatively obscure point, Leibniz adds something more in one of his remarks – probably drafted around 1695 – on Twisse's treatise on *Scientia Media*.

Leibniz is commenting on a passage in which Twisse discusses the Schoolmen's divergent opinions on the way in which created things are to be regarded as contained in God:

In the divine essence things are [contained] in an eminent way (*eminenter*). In the understanding they are contained somewhat more widely, but in a representative way (*repraesentative*), for the divine understanding also represents the imperfections or the limitations of things. He who knows all positive things also knows perfectly all relations and indeed all limitations. In fact, God's knowledge of created things, even individual ones, consists in this. Position (*positio*) or actuality (*actus*), and restriction or privation, are in things as metaphysical form and metaphysical matter. And thus, the matter of things is nothing, it is limitation; form is perfection. Indeed, any perfection that can constitute something complete, together with the exclusion of further perfection, constitutes a creature (*Nempe quaevis perfectio quae aliquid completum constituere potest cum seclusionem alterius perfectionis, facit creaturam*)¹². Complete perfection is that which involves the totality of all things which can exist together (*universum coexistibilium*). (Grua 355–356)

In the first line, Leibniz draws a distinction (a purely conceptual one, of course) between God's essence and his understanding. When considered apart from his understanding (*praecise*, as the Schoolmen would say), the essence of God is composed by a series of attributes which are said to be formally contained in it. These attributes, however, are not the same thing as the ideas of created things. Nonetheless, all things, i.e., all created ones are said to be contained in God's essence in an *eminent* way, rather than in a formal one¹³.

When the divine understanding is taken into consideration, however, something more (*amplius*) is added to what is contained in divine essence as taken in itself, and this something more is expressed with the adverb *repraesentative*, «for the divine understanding represents also the imperfections or the limitations

12 Following the manuscript (LH I, 6, 2, Bl. 24v), I read *facit creaturam* instead of Grua's *fuit creatura*.

13 Insofar as there is some reality or perfection in it, every contingent thing (be it actual or purely possible) is said to be contained eminently in God, which is the most perfect being and the source of all perfections; cf. Leibniz's statement in *Principles of Nature and Grace*, §9, GP VI 602/AG 210. For the thesis that everything is eminently contained in God, see also Leibniz to Bayle, 1702, GP III 72 (or A II 4: 112). On this topic, see especially Antognazza (2015).

of things». In representing something to himself, God represents not only his own essence (which is unlimited and absolutely perfect), but also the ideas of finite things, which derive from the essence of God, albeit in a limited and imperfect way. Note that Leibniz is not only emphasizing the relative (i.e., limited) status of the ideas of created things, but also their relational states: God, who knows everything positive (i.e., his own perfections), also knows all relations, and, therefore all limitations in which the cognition of creatures consists¹⁴.

In late Scholasticism, as I have already shown in Chapter 2, even those who accepted the idea that divine knowledge is referred to the ideas of creatures (but not, as was claimed by the followers of Ockham, to creatures themselves) were committed to the view that God's knowledge must be understood as a knowledge of essences having some kind of being in themselves. The contrast between Aquinas' point of view and that of modern Schoolmen can be understood if one acknowledges that the first is a model based on the idea of *participation*, while the second is based on the idea of *representation*. Aquinas maintains that when God knows the essence of finite things in himself, he knows them in their own cause, i.e., divine omnipotence. Before creation, there is only God's *creatrix essentia*, which can be thought of as imitable in infinitely many ways, in terms of a relation of participation.

The point defended by Suárez and other late Schoolmen, by contrast, is based on the view that what God knows are creatures as *possible* in themselves (not in their cause), and, that, therefore, they are *represented* by his own ideas which are placed in the understanding. On this point, notice that Leibniz clearly sides with the representative view, as he explicitly states in one of his annotations to Gilbert Burnet's treatise on predestination:

God cannot intuit himself, and relate all things to the manifestation of his perfections, without at the same time having an intuition of the nature of things, which He possesses eminently in His own ideas, and in whose production he manifests his own attributes. Therefore, it must not be said God has just an intuition of himself only (*Deus non potest se ipsum intueri, et omnia ad perfectionum suarum manifestationem referre, quin simul intueatur rerum naturas, quas in suis ideis eminenter habet, et in quibus producendis attributa sua manifestat. Itaque dicendum non est, Deum se ipsum solummodo hic intueri*). (A IV 9: 585/DPG 53)

14 This is confirmed by a passage from his discussion of Locke's criticism of Malebranche's doctrine of ideas: «When the Father [Malebranche] says that ideas are representative entities (*des estres representatifs*), Locke is entitled [...] to ask if these beings are substances, modes or relations. I believe that one may say that they are just relations that result from the attributes of God» (A VI 6: 556 or GP VI 576). The way possible created things fit together in the same world is a relational matter, but it is also the cause of each of them being limited: for example, a thing is limited in spatial extent because it has to fit into a world with other spatially extended things (this has been pointed out to me by Richard Arthur). God's knowledge of individuals amounts to his knowledge of their mutual relations of connection, and, in this sense, limitations do follow from relations of compossibility, as Leibniz seems to suggest in the text above.

This passage is meant as a further explanation of a point Leibniz has already raised before, i.e., that «God decrees nothing without having inspected the natures of things», for, as he explains, God's actual decree is the cause of things, but the decree (the act of will) is not reason of itself, because its reasons are located in the nature of what is merely possible («*pro parte ex ideis rerum in divino intellectu spectatis*») (A IV 9: 583/DPG 51).

What is remarkable here is that, even if Leibniz says that the natures of things are contained in God *eminenter* (which I take as another way of saying that possible things are just ideas or concepts), God's intuition of his own essence does not have primacy over the natures of things. In other words, God's knowledge of himself is paired with his knowledge of possibles as they are in themselves¹⁵.

These two aspects of divine knowledge are thus regarded as inseparable and reciprocally intertwined, as Leibniz says in another part of the same text:

But while God reflects on himself, it is impossible for him not to reflect on the possible ideas of things; and while he directs all things to his glory, he, at the same time, considers the perfections of things, whose production is worthy of his wisdom and power. It is true that the possibilities of things flow from the divine essence because they are eternal truths; and the actual perfections of these things because they come about in time, arise out of the divine will, and are conformed to the rules of highest wisdom. [...] Still, God considers the creatures as possibles in their series before he decrees their creation; and so God is not reduced to a dependence on man, but the divine will is accommodated to the divine intellect, in which the ideas of creatures are found, and, therefore, also the possibilities of things are comprehended. (A IV 9: 619/DPG 85)

15 Cf. also Leibniz's exchange with M. Fardella in 1692. In his letter to Leibniz of September 1692, Fardella writes: «The Scholastics, with Aquinas and Scotus, maintain that prior to every free decree of God there exists in God a knowledge of possible things, which they call the knowledge of the simple intelligence; but it seems to me that in God there exists only the idea of himself, essential, natural, and necessary, while the ideas of other things, which are not God, are contingent, arbitrary, and dependent on the free decree of God» (A II 2: 580). In his reply, dated October 1692, Leibniz writes: «The ideas of creatures result from the idea of God, just as the idea of numbers results from the idea of unity. Thus, by understanding himself, God at the same time comprehends all possibles in His mind, nor is there in this any more room for freedom than there is in the derivation of numbers from the repetition of unity, nor is the idea of a circle any more arbitrary than that of two or three. [...] You rightly say that God is self-sufficient, being supremely wise and happy; but it must be understood that the essences of creatures are nothing other than various expressions of divine perfection, which, if God did not understand, he would not understand himself sufficiently (*Ideae creaturarum resultant ex idea Dei, ut idea numerorum ex idea unitatis. Itaque Deus eo ipso dum sese intelligit, omnia possibilia mente complectitur, neque in ea re magis est libertati locus, quam in derivatione numerorum ex repetitione unitatis, nec magis idea circuli quam binarii aut ternarii arbitraria est. [...]* Recte ais Deum sibi sufficere ut sit summe sapiens et felix; sed sciendum est creaturarum essentias nihil aliud esse quam varias divinae perfectionis expressiones, quas nisi intelligeret Deus, nec se ipsum satis intelligeret») (A II 2: 594).

As is made clear by the distinction between the way God *seipsum considerat*, on one hand, and the way in which God *considerat creaturas tanquam possibles in serie sua*, on the other, Leibniz is committed to the view that God takes cognizance of possible creatures *in seipsis* rather than *in seipso*. This is another way of saying that he inclines towards the representative interpretation more than towards the exemplarist interpretation¹⁶.

9.4. The Puzzle of Existence Revisited

Leibniz's identification of possible individuals with divine ideas *tout court* might be as a response to an actualist worry concerning the eventuality of talking of merely possible objects, i.e., objects that are not grounded in something actually existing. In this sense, ideas are a good candidate, since they require the actual existence of an intellect (the divine one) which contains and contemplates them.

From the ontological point of view, one can solve the question by stating that the complete concept is not, properly speaking, an individual essence, but stands for it, i.e., *represents* something which *would be* an individual essence were it to be realized (assumed that there is no real distinction between essence and existence). The impossibility of distinguishing (at the level of properties or conceptual determinations) between, say, the concept of Adam and the actual Adam is at the basis of Leibniz's formulation of what I have called the "puzzle of existence".

In a series of scattered notes on metaphysics probably written at the end of 1677, for instance, he wrote: «If essence were the same thing as existence, then it would change nothing in any series. Therefore, since existence is added to essence, it follows that not all the things which have essence also have existence, but that there is a peculiar reason for existence»¹⁷.

The clearest formulation of this puzzle, however, occurs in the correspondence with Eckhard, which takes place in 1677. The discussion between the two concerns the reliability of the Cartesian version of the ontological proof, which is questioned by Leibniz and defended by Eckhard. In particular, Leibniz stresses two critical points: (a) the possibility – i.e., the logical consistency – of the concept of a most perfect being, and (b) the question of whether existence can be regarded as a perfection or not. Point (b) focuses on the puzzle of existence, i.e., on the fact that, although it seems that there is an absolute difference

16 The representative account is stressed in many paragraphs of the *Theodicy*, cf. §42 and §84, which are discussed by Mondadori (1990a: 183). Mondadori's discussion at 179–183 provides the best account of how divine ideas can be said to represent individual essences and possible things.

17 «Si essentia idem esset quod existentia, mutaretur nihil in ulla serie. Hinc cum existentia addat essentiae sequitur non omnia essentiam habentia habere existentiam, sed esse rationem existendi peculiarem» (A VI 4: 1349). The first line seems to question the correctness of the claim that there can be no real distinction between essence and existence. This is not a coincidence, because the puzzle of existence was an argument typically employed by the supporters of the real distinction.

between a possible thing (with all its perfections or *realitates*) and actual existence, nonetheless existence might be regarded as being a perfection (or a *realitas*), for in every actual thing there seems to be contained something more than in every corresponding possible thing.

This is exactly the point emphasized by Leibniz in his letter to Eckhard of Summer 1677:

Several of my objections have ended since you have explained that in your usage, perfection is being (*Entitas*) insofar as it is understood to differ from non-being, or, as I should prefer to define it, that *perfection* is the degree or quantity of reality or essence [...]. It is clear, also, that existence is a perfection or increases reality, that is: when *A* is thought of as *existing*, more reality is thought of than when *A* is conceived as *possible*. (A II 1²: 543/L 177)

After having doubted that existence could be regarded as a perfection, Leibniz seems to accept the point of view of his correspondent, when the term “perfection” is understood as a synonym of “degree of reality” or “degree of essence”¹⁸. Notice, however, that the concept of perfection, from the very beginning, seems to involve a certain ambiguity. From the linguistic point of view, indeed, it should be pointed out that Latin does not use determinative or indefinite articles, so, when one employs the term *perfectio*, it is not always easy to understand whether one has in mind *a* perfection (as when one says, as in the text quoted in the note above, that “Existence is a certain reality”, i.e., one among the perfections a determinate entity possesses) or *the* perfection, i.e., as Leibniz says, the degree or quantity of reality of a determinate essence. I will return to this point in what follows.

One of the most important texts is a note to which Leibniz himself gave the title *Existentia* and which the editors (see A VI 4, N. 254) date to the same period as the one in which Leibniz was engaged in his discussion with Eckhard. It reads as follows:

It can be doubted whether existence is a perfection, i.e., a degree of reality, or not; for it can be doubted if existence is among the number of things which can be conceived or which are among the parts of essence; or, on the contrary, if it is just a sort of imaginary concept, such as that of *heat* and *cold*, which are nothing but a denomination of our perception, not of something in the nature of things. However, if we carefully consider that we do conceive something more when we

18 Cf. also Leibniz's notes to Eckhard's long letter of May 1677, A II 1²: 508, esp. fn4 («*Existentia est quaedam realitas*») and fn5 («*Existens plus habet realitatis quam idem non existens*»). Interestingly enough, Leibniz also remarks that a distinction (a conceptual one, at least) between existence and perfection has to be posited, because existence is absolute whereas there are degrees of perfection: «[...] while being or thing is an absolute, the notion of perfection is comparative with non-being or with a lesser being, since it is closer to non-being (*dum scilicet Ens vel res est absolutum, perfecti notio est comparativa, cum non ente, aut minori ente, quod non enti magis accedit*)» (A II 1²: 509 fn9).

conceive that a thing A exists than when we say that is possible, therefore it seems that it is true that existence is a certain degree of reality; or, at least that it is a certain relation to a degree of reality. However, existence is not a degree of reality, because of every degree of reality one can understand possibility as well as existence. Therefore, existence will be the exceedance (*excessus*) of the degree of reality of a thing upon the degree of reality of the opposite thing, i.e., what exists is that which is more perfect than all the other things which are incompatible with each other; and, conversely, what exists is more perfect than the others. Therefore, it is true that what exists is more perfect than that which does not exist, but it is not true that existence itself is a perfection, for it is just a certain comparison among perfections. (A VI 4: 1354)

This text expands on what Leibniz has already said in the passage to Eckhard quoted above. With respect to the former, however, it takes into consideration both horns of the dilemma.

According to the first, (1) existence is a perfection (or, as Leibniz specifies, a component of the essence of a thing), because we do conceive something more in A taken as *existing* than in the very same A taken as *merely possible*. According to the second, (2) existence is not a perfection, or a degree of essence, because every degree of essence can be understood as possible as well as existent.

Point (2) is not immediately clear, but can be elucidated by what Leibniz notes elsewhere, i.e., that: «If existence were something other than an exigency of essence, it would follow that it has a certain essence or adds something new to things, concerning which it could be asked in turn whether this essence exists, and why it rather than another»¹⁹. Assume, for instance, that the essence of A , taken as merely possible, is composed by the concepts B , C , and D . Now, if existence were to be considered as a part of essence, or, equivalently, if something new were added to it, let's say E , we would obtain that the concept of the *existent* A is composed by B , C , D , and E . The concept of the *existent* A would accordingly be different, however, from that of A , and one could, for this reason, ask again whether the concept of the *existent* A (i.e., B , C , D , E) exists or not.

The possibility of an infinite regress seems to be involved here, as soon as we assume that existence is a conceptual determination of a(ny) thing. But this seems to be absurd; there are no reasons, therefore, why the regress should be blocked at a certain point and not right from the beginning. Thus, existence cannot be regarded as part of the essence of A . Furthermore, as we will see in a moment, Leibniz rejects the idea that existence (in the sense of “actuality”) might be regarded as something which can be possible as well as existent, for the very simple reason that the idea of an existent thing which does not exist involves a contradiction in terms.

19 *De Veritatibus Primis*, ca. 1680, A VI 4: 1443 fn3 (transl. by Curley 1976: 85).

Returning to the text of *Existentia*, there is something else which is worth noticing. The problem of whether existence should be regarded as a perfection shifts from the original formulation – in which the same individual *A* is considered twice, i.e., as existing and as merely possible – to a somewhat different formulation, in which the existence of an individual is contrasted not with the mere possibility of that same individual, but with the non-existence (or the mere possibility) of other individuals, which are said to be opposite or incompatible with the first.

In the first case, the dilemma seems to be a genuine one, since, given that *A-possible* and *A-existent* are the same, they should also be indiscernible (and, indeed, every property of *A-possible* is also a property of *A-existent*, and vice versa). If we assume that there is something in *A-existent* which is not contained in *A-possible* (this is what Leibniz calls the fact of existence adding some reality to a thing), the two are no longer indiscernible; and one does not see any reason, therefore, why the two are to be taken as two concepts of the same thing and not as two different concepts²⁰.

The second formulation of the problem, by contrast, allows Leibniz to find a solution to the puzzle, by showing that a third position is available, i.e., that existence itself is not a perfection, even though the thing which exists is nevertheless more perfect than any other possible thing which is impossible with it. This solution involves the idea that existence has a relational (or, better still, comparative) nature, as suggested by the remark that it cannot be considered a degree of reality but only a «certain relation to a degree of reality».

This leads Leibniz to formulate what seems to be a definition of existence, or, better still, of what is to be worthy of existence. The double implication is explicitly remarked by Leibniz himself: something exists *if and only if* it is more perfect than all the other things which are mutually incompatible. Among the virtues of this “definition”, one has to count that it is applicable to the case of God as well as that of contingent creatures²¹. Since what is properly defined

20 The idea that everything that can be said of the actual Adam has to be regarded as already contained in its purely possible notion is clearly stated in the *Specimen Inventorum*: «In the perfect notion [i.e., complete concept] of an individual substance considered by God in the state of pure possibility, prior to every actual decree for existence, it is already contained (*inest*) whatever would happen to it if it were to exist, and also the whole series of things to which it belongs» (A VI 4: 1619). And in *De Natura Veritatis, Contingentiae et Indifferentiae*, written around 1685–86, when discussing God’s taking into consideration the notion of a mind taken as possible, he emphasizes that: «The possibility [...] or the notion of a created mind does not involve existence. When God considers that notion as possible and perfectly knows in it every future event as possible, [...] he understands now, i.e., perfectly knows everything which would follow from the existence of that thing» (A VI 4: 1523). In both cases, but especially in the latter passage, where Leibniz mentions *omnia quae sint ipsius existentiam consequutura*, there is an implicit reference to the conditional reading of propositions.

21 Cf. *Elementa Verae Pietatis*, A VI 4: 1358 and 1362–1363; *Definitiones Cogitationesque Metaphysicae*, A VI 4: 1395 (LoC 239).

here is not existence as such, but, rather, the reason why an individual (a world) is chosen by God to be actualized, this account can be properly regarded as an *axiological* theory of existence²².

The sense of this comparison is clearly expounded by Leibniz in *De Libertate et Necessitate*:

Except for the existence of God alone, all existences are contingent. Moreover, the reason (*causa*) why some particular contingent thing exists, rather than others, should not be sought in its definition alone, but in a comparison with other things, for, since there are an infinity of possible things which, nevertheless, do not exist, the reason (*ratio*) why these exist rather than those should not be sought in their definition (for then non-existence would imply a contradiction, and those others would not be possible, contrary to our hypothesis), but from an extrinsic source, namely, from the fact that the ones that do exist are more perfect than the others (A VI 4: 1445/AG 19).

To the line: «the reason why some particular contingent thing exists, rather than others, should not be sought in its definition alone», Leibniz – it should be noted – had originally drafted the following adjunct: «but from some further reason (*ratio*). Indeed, there was a reason for it to exist rather than not to exist». The last sentence, however, was cancelled and substituted with a reference to the comparison with all other things. Such a comparison does presuppose the system of possible worlds, i.e., the idea that there are alternative and mutually exclusive sets of possible things (complete concepts), only one of which can be actually created by God. The idea of mutually excluding alternatives is also implicit in Leibniz's reference to the idea that certain things have been created rather than others (and the necessity of providing a reason for this exclusion).

In the continuation of *De Libertate et Necessitate*, the idea that «only the most perfect exists» is explained in the following way:

Let there be two possible things, *A* and *B*, one of which is such that it is necessary that it exists, and let us assume that there is more perfection in *A* than in *B*. Then, at least, we can explain why *A* should exist rather than *B* and can foresee which of them will exist; indeed, this can be demonstrated, that is, rendered certain from the nature of the thing. And, if being certain were the same as being necessary, then, I admit, it would also be necessary for *A* to exist. But I call such necessity hypothetical [...]. And so we must hold that everything having some degree of perfection is possible and, moreover, that the possible that occurs is the one more perfect than its opposite, and that this happens not because of its

22 Cf. Schneider (1974: 212–213). Contrary to compossibility relations, which are internal to each possible world, Leibniz particularly emphasizes that the comparison between the degrees of perfections of different individuals in different worlds are necessarily inter-mundane ones. This is why he speaks of an “extrinsic” principle when discussing the principle of perfection.

nature but because of God's general resolve to create that which is more perfect. Perfection, or essence, is an urge for existence (*exigentia existentiae*) from which existence indeed follows *per se*, not necessarily, but from the denial that another thing more perfect prevents it from existing. All truths of physics are of this sort; for example, when we say that some body persists in the speed with which it begins, we mean it does so if nothing prevents it. (A VI 4: 1446–1447/AG 20)

This quotation is taken from a theological text, where Leibniz is primarily concerned with the topic of the rejection of necessitarianism. This justifies his remarks that the necessity of “*A exists*” does not follow from the nature of *A* alone, but also from the hypothesis of (the choice of) the best. Another point to be highlighted is that Leibniz's toy model, so to say, is based on the comparison between two individuals only, *A* and *B*, whereas, from the point of view of God, the comparison is between an infinity of individuals.

Again, when *A* and *B* are taken as standing for two possible worlds, it is quite easy to make sense of the idea that «the possible that occurs is the one more perfect than its opposite», i.e., since our toy model is composed of just two possible worlds, and only one of them can be actualized, the meaning of this opposition is clear enough. When moving from worlds to individuals, however, things become a little bit more complicated. It is not difficult to understand the sense in which an individual *A* (belonging to the world W_A) can be said to be “opposite” to the individual *B* (belonging to the world W_B), given that they are mutually impossible (they do not belong to the same world)²³.

What is difficult, however, is the way in which one must choose the individuals (belonging to these two worlds) to be compared: which individual in W_A has to be compared with which other individual in W_B in order to say that *A* is more perfect than *B*, and, thus, that the world that contains *A* has to be preferred?²⁴

The problem is not easy, for, as Leibniz himself acknowledges many times, as far as “perfection” is concerned, the one-to-one correspondence between

23 At the beginning of the *Generales Inquisitiones*, Leibniz says that *existens* can be defined as «that which is compatible with more things than anything else incompatible with it (*quod cum pluribus compatibile est quam quodlibet aliud incompatible cum ipso*)» (A VI 4: 744/GI 53). Assuming that, here, “compatibility” is a synonym of “compossibility”, this amounts to say that *A* exists if and only if *A* is compossible with the most richest/perfect group of compossible things (i.e., the group of things which is compossible with *A* is more perfect than any other group of compossible things which are compossible with any individual *B*, with *B* incompatible with *A*). Or, as Leibniz says in §73: «I say, therefore, that an existing being is that which is compatible with the most things, i.e. a most possible being (*Ajo igitur Existens esse Ens quod cum plurimis compatibile est; seu Ens maxime possibile*)» (A VI 4: 763/GI 85), where the second “possible” stands for “compossible”. This idea had already been envisaged in a text from December 1676: «whatever can exist and is compatible with others, exists» (A VI 3: 582/DSR 105).

24 The difficulty seems to have been envisaged by Leibniz in a note to Eckhard's letter of May 1677, A II, 1²: 508 fn5: «The question is asked whether there is more reality in the idea or concept of an existing stone than in the concept of a non-existing man». Cf. also A II 1²: 499–500.

worlds and individuals breaks down. Perfection is a *global* and not a local feature of a(ny) world, for the fact that something exists in the most perfect world (globally taken) does not mean that that very same thing is, for this reason, the most perfect one (at the local level); for this is the only sense in which Leibniz's theodicy can make room for the presence of evil in the world²⁵. The difficulty can be weakened if we shift from the individual to its complete concept, since the latter mirrors the entire world to which it belongs.

At this point, however, the parallelism between individuals and worlds is restored, but the question of which individual has to be chosen in a world W_A to be compared with an individual in another world W_B becomes a pointless one (for the degree of reality to be taken into account is that of the whole world that the individual mirrors, not that of the individual itself, which can be sub-optimal even in the case of the optimal world).

Thus, when Leibniz observes that «the possible that occurs [exists] is the one more perfect than its opposite», it would be better to understand “possible” as referring to a “possible world”, globally taken, rather than to a possible individual.

9.5. *Existurientia*: An Existential Notion of Possibility

The other important element in this text is that perfection is not defined in terms of “degree of reality”, but, rather, is considered as synonymous with “essence” and is defined in terms of an *exigentia existentiae*. In one of his tables of definitions, indeed, Leibniz writes: «It is said to be demanded that which follows from what has been posited, if nothing else is further posited (*Exigi dicitur quod ex positis sequitur, si nihil aliud praeterea ponatur*)» (A VI 4: 630)²⁶.

25 Cf. §§211–214 of the *Theodicy*, where Leibniz criticizes the idea that «what is the best in the whole is also the best possible in each part» (§212, GP VI 245/H 264). The argument works well in geometry when one dwells with problems *de maximis et minimis*, but it fails when one moves from quantity to quality: «The part of the shortest way between two extreme points is also the shortest way between the extreme points of this part; but the part of the best Whole is not of necessity the best that one could have made of this part» (§213, GP VI 245/H 264–265). In the first case, indeed, the part is homogeneous to the whole (and this is why Leibniz normally restricts the term “part” to quantitative parts alone, since homogeneity is an essential feature of the notion of parthood). But goodness and beauty are global properties, i.e., they result not from uniformity and homogeneity, but from the harmony between identity and diversity (or, also, between homogeneity and non-homogeneity). Cf. also the geometrical example discussed in §214 (GP VI 246).

26 In a letter to Des Bosses (2 February 1706), Leibniz writes as follows: «[...] for I maintain that in an active power there is an exigency (as your schools say) for action and hence for divine concurrence for action, albeit an exigency that can be resisted, which is grounded in the laws of nature established through divine wisdom [...]» (A II 4: 396 or GP II 295/LDB 11). The editors of LDB explain that “exigency” is a technical term of Scholastic philosophy, which signifies “a natural, as opposed to an absolute or metaphysical necessity” (LDB 403 note 11).

This aligns with the claim that, from an exigency to exist, existence follows *per se*, if there is no obstacle or impediment which prevents it from existing. The only kind of impediment, moreover, could only be represented by another, more perfect thing (which, in the case of what is maximally perfect, must be excluded). This might remind us of Leibniz's early working on the notion of *causa plena*, i.e., that whose effects follow from it unless it is impeded by something external (i.e., an impediment).

If one looks at the series of drafts *De Affectibus*, one will see how the old model of the "full cause" has been widely employed in the passage from Leibniz's original analysis of the "series of thought" (*series cogitandi*) to the ontological framework of the *series rerum*. The distinction between following *per se* and being impeded, which is at work in the passage above, has been introduced by Leibniz in order to explain his concept of "determination"²⁷. What Leibniz calls "determination" is just one state from which something else follows if there is nothing to prevent it: «From one [status] it also follows the maximum of what can follow from that, i.e., everything which can follow from that and is not impeded» (A VI 4: 1428). In another passage, the connection between Leibniz's early theory of causation and his new ontological approach appears quite clearly. «All things which, considered in themselves (*per se spectata*), can follow from something considered in itself (*per se spectato*), they will follow as much as they can» (A VI 4: 1432). He himself adds a note in which he says that the previous passage contains what he calls a «wonderful transition from power to act (*admirabilis transitus e potentia ad actum*)» (*Ibidem*).

In his mature formulations (as in the passage from *De Libertate et Necessitate* quoted above) the idea of *per se* following is distinguished from what follows in a necessary way, where the latter has to be understood in terms of natural necessity. What follows in itself but not necessarily, since it can be impeded by something else, constitutes a sort of intermediate level between what is absolutely necessary and what is purely accidental (for what is *per se* is explicitly contrasted with what is *per accidens*); this sense of *per se* following constitutes what Leibniz also calls *nature* (or *natural predicates*), in contrast with a narrower sense of essence, and is employed to enlighten the sense in which one has to say that everything which can be ascribed to a determinate individual (or, also, everything which happens to it) follows from its own nature²⁸.

27 Cf. A VI 4: 1429 and 1430; see also 1431: «Power is the state from which something can follow, considered in itself (or from which, considered in itself, it is demonstrated that something else is possible). The more perfect a thing is, the more powerful it is, and conversely (for the more perfect a thing is, the more reality it involves [...]). From each thing there follows that which, considered in itself, is the most perfect of the things that can follow from it (*Potentia est status ex quo quid sequi potest per se spectato (vel ex quo per se spectato aliud aliquid possibile esse demonstratur). Quo quid est perfectius, hoc est potentius, et contra (nam quo quid est perfectius, hoc plus involvit realitatis [...]). Ex unoquoque sequitur id quod per se spectatum perfectissimum est eorum quae ex ipso sequi possunt*)».

28 Cf. *New Essays*, IV, ix, §1: «However, we can take the accidental in a narrower way, so that there is a kind of middle ground between it and the essential: this middle ground is the

Another draft of *De Affectibus* contains a statement of the principle: «Existence follows from every possibility, if nothing impedes that» (A VI 4: 1434). The main difference with the physical model is that, while in the former the (potential) presence of an impediment was regarded as something external, in the case of what is purely possible the nature of the impediment has become a purely internal one, i.e., the relation of impossibility between different sets of possible things²⁹. What is still lacking is the new terminology of *existurientia*, which will be extensively employed by Leibniz from the 1680s onwards³⁰.

The upshot of this intense work of rethinking will be condensed in a text written between March and August 1689, where the metaphysical question “why those things exist rather than others?” is directly dealt with. Leibniz explains that, once one has provided an answer to the former question, one must then provide an answer to the other question “why something rather than nothing?”:

This reason is to be found in the prevalence of reasons for existence compared with the reasons for non-existence, that is to say it in a word, in the *Existurientia* of essences, so that those things will exist which are not impeded. For indeed, if nothing demands existence (*si nihil existuriret*), there would be no reason for existence. But assuming that all things demand existence, the existence of some things follows, for, because not all things can coexist together, the existence of those things follows through which most things coexist. [...] From this it is evident that every possible tends to exist in itself (*ex se*), but that it is impeded by accident, and that there are no other reasons for not existing, unless they do not arise from the conjunction of these very same reasons for existence. However, there must be *a parte rei* an existing root of the *Existurientia* of essences; otherwise there will be nothing in essences except a figment of the mind [...]. But this root cannot be anything other than the necessary being, the foundation of essences and the origin of existences, i.e., God. (A VI 4: 1634–1635/LST 30–31)

natural, meaning that which does not necessarily belong to the thing but which nevertheless is inherently appropriate to it if there is nothing which prevents» (A VI 6: 433–434). The distinction between the essential and the natural is also recalled in the *Theodicy*, §383 (GP VI 342) and especially in GP IV 582. Reference to the Jurists is related to the conception of “presumption”, as Leibniz states in Grua 373, where «necessary or essential principles» are contrasted to «presumptive or natural ones, just as the jurists distinguish between the essential and the natural ones». Cf. my remarks in the Introduction, §6.

29 Cf. Di Bella (2005a: 108).

30 Cf. also *Enumeratio Terminorum Simpliciorum*, ca. 1680–85, A VI 4: 393, where Leibniz introduces the notion of *Acturiens*, defined as «quod per se spectatum agit, si scilicet nihil impediatur» (and in a marginal note, he will add that *acturiens* is the same as *conans*). From the linguistic point of view, *Existurientia* has the same form as *Acturiens*; from the metaphysical point of view, however, *Existurientia* is a sort of (ideal and, perhaps, metaphorical) translation of *Acturiens* at the level of possibility, with a main difference: the *Acturiens* is what is actually efficacious in the context of the actual series of things, where the *Existurientia* represents what would exist/have existed if the series of things to which it belongs had been actualized by God. In other words, Leibniz includes within the notion of *Existurientia* the idea of being a possible individual, i.e., something which could be (or could have been) actualized.

The apparently exoteric term *existurientia*, which Leibniz coins as shorthand for *praevalentia rationum ad existendum* (or, as he says in another text, *praevalentia existendiandi*³¹) is a substantive derived from *existiturus sum* (in the same way as *existentia* is derived from *existo*). Such a nominalization of the future form of the participle characterizes a sort of existential possibility which is ascribed to purely possible individuals, and stands for “what would exist” if nothing impedes it (or, in the case of non-actualized possibilities, “what would have existed etc.”).

It is interesting to observe how the notion of *existurientia* originates from Leibniz’s reflections on the *lingua philosophica*, where he notes that the future participle *locuturus* does not just mean «he who will talk» (*eum qui loquetur*), but, rather, «he who would speak if nothing impedes it» (*qui loquetur si nihil impedit*)³². Similarly, the neologism *existurientia* refers to those things which are said to be *existiturae*, i.e., that will actually exist if nothing prevents it³³.

The notion of *existurientia* characterizes an existential sense of possibility, reminiscent of the Scholastic idea of *aptitudo ad existentiam*. In that case, too, the difference between real possibilities and mere fictional entities could not just be expressed in terms of their being the object of knowledge (since the *esse cognitum* can be ascribed to fictional beings as well). Something more was required, i.e., the fact that a real possibility is something which can be (but not necessarily is) created by God, since it possesses an *aptitudo* toward existence.

Finally, Leibniz repeats what we have already seen in other passages above, i.e., this tendency toward existence is something which pertains to the possible *in* themselves, *but* is not something that possible things derive *from* themselves, for it is rooted in a necessary being³⁴. In the last line of the text from which the passage

31 Cf. LH IV, iii, 5e, Bl. 30r (ca.1700): «Furthermore, the very same cause which makes something to be rather than nothing also makes the more to be rather than the less, and indeed the reason is the act or predominance of the existifying in the cause or principle of the existing beings (*praevalentia existendiandi in causa seu principio existentiarum*)» (translated by De Risi 2006: 59).

32 *De Lingua Philosophica*, ca. 1687-88, A VI 4: 902. This, Leibniz says, is useful from the point of view of “philosophical grammar”, since it allows us to distinguish between two kinds of futures, *loquar* and *locuturus sum*: «Thus, *loquar* means that there is a certain time in which this proposition will be true: “I speak” (*ego loquor*). But *locuturus sum* means the will or the tendency (*conatum*) to speak, i.e., that *the act of speaking will follow if nothing impedes it (secuturam loquelam si nihil impedit)*» (A VI 4: 903).

33 The idea of the tendency towards existence is, implicitly or explicitly, at work in many passages of the writings of Leibniz’s middle period; see A VI 4: 557, 568, 626, 631, 864, 871, 875, 1442–1443, 1460, 1634–1635; see also *De Rerum Originatione Radicali*, GP VII 302–308, and also GP VII 289–291; cf. also Pasini (2013). Many thanks to Enrico Pasini for sharing his paper with me.

34 Cf. GP VII 289: «There is therefore a cause why existence prevails over non-existence; in other words, the necessary Being is *Existifying* (*Est ergo causa cur Existentia praevaleat non-Existentiae, seu Ens necessarium est Existentificans*)». In the following theses, Leibniz explains that what makes it that something exists is also what provides every possible with a tendency or *conatus* toward existence, i.e., *existurientia*. From the fact that every possible thing has such a tendency, it does not follow, however, that every possible thing exists.

above is taken, Leibniz remarks: «For essences do not make their way to existence except in God and through God, so that there is in God the reality of essences, or of eternal truths, and the production of existents, or of contingent truths» (A VI 4: 1635/LST 31). The metaphor of the possibles' *striving* towards existence has to be properly understood in terms of a contrast between God's antecedent and his consequent will, as Leibniz himself will explain in the *Theodicy*³⁵.

There is a question which must be discussed at length in what follows, i.e., how this kind of existential or post-existential notion of possibility is connected with Leibniz's idea of purely logical possibility. At the end of the Paris period, Leibniz managed to keep the notion of logical possibility (i.e., the idea of things "possible in themselves") sharply distinct from the causal or temporal notion of possibility. Now, however, it may seem that Leibniz is once again blurring together these two notions, for he is assuming that things, insofar as they are possible (i.e., purely, i.e. logically possible), possess a sort of quasi-causal possibility, i.e., a tendency towards existence which would be necessarily realized if nothing prevents it, although the very same idea of an impediment has been reduced to something holding at a purely ideal level³⁶.

9.6. Existence and Extrinsic Denominations

Before proceeding to interrogate this question, however, I must conclude the discussion of Leibniz's solution to the "puzzle of existence". If we return to what Leibniz says in *De Libertate et Necessitate*, we can see that, since the reason why actual individuals exist is not contained in their definition, it must be something "extrinsic" to it (*ex principio extrinseco*), or, in other words, it must consist in the fact that the set of things which constitute the actual worlds is more perfect than any other set of things.

Leibniz's reference to God's comparing all possible worlds as well as the relational character of existence seem to speak in favour of Edwin Curley's interpretation: existence not pertaining to the definition of a thing means that existence is something like an *extrinsic denomination*; and, since – for Leibniz – there

35 Cf. *Theodicy*, §22 and §201, GP VI 115–116 and 236. On the distinction between antecedent and consequent will, see Rateau (2019: 216–226). See also the *Dialogue entre Theophile et Polidore*, 1679, A VI 4: 2232: «However, possible things have no existence at all nor do they have any power to exist, and, accordingly, one has to look for the choice and the cause of their existence in a being whose existence has already been established and, therefore, is necessary in itself». On the metaphorical character of the idea of this conflict among possibles, cf. Poser (1969: 86–98); Blumenfeld (1973).

36 The striving possibles seem to be connected also with Leibniz's favourite way of rejecting necessitarianism, i.e., the distinction between necessitating and merely inclining reasons. In *De Veritatibus Primis*, indeed, the idea of a tendency towards existence of purely possible things is interpreted in terms of their *inclinatio*: «Nothing would exist if there were not a certain inclination towards existence in the very nature of essence» (A VI 4: 1443).

are *no* purely extrinsic denominations, this also means that «there must be some basis in the nature [or essence] of a thing for its existence»³⁷.

Curley has also pointed out how, in *De Contingentia* (ca. 1689), Leibniz had initially repeated the claim that existence adds nothing new to the essence of a thing, but, afterwards, he had chosen to replace it with a different formulation. Leibniz has originally written: «And since existence does not add any new form to essence, otherwise ... (*Et cum Existentia Essentiae non addat novam formam, alioqui Essentiam ...*)», before the sentence breaks down; but the definitive version is completely different: «And this seems to be common both to necessary and to contingent existents, namely that they have more reason [to exist] than other things which might be put in their place (*Et Existentibus tam necessariis quam contingentibus hoc commune esse videtur, ut plus habeant rationis quam alia quae ipsorum loco ponerentur*)» (A VI 4: 1650).

In *De Contingentia*, however, Leibniz does not say that “existence” is contained in the notion of “Adam-the-sinner”, but, rather, that there is *something* in this notion (“Adam-the-sinner”, as merely possible), because of which one can say that it exists. That “something” might presumably be the fact that the notion of that individual (together with all his properties, sin included) belongs to the more perfect set of possible things. It is only because of the latter that one can say that such an individual notion has been instantiated. This is the sense in which existence can be regarded as a “consequential” property (according to Curley’s reading), i.e., as a property that an individual instantiates as a consequence of having other properties (in this case, those which determine that that individual belongs to the most perfect series of things)³⁸.

That said, however, I suspect that Leibniz modified his idea somewhat, the change consisting in his increasing emphasis on the fact that essences have a tendency toward existence *in* themselves (though not *from* themselves). This

37 Curley (1976: 86). He also writes: «Things which differ in respect of existence cannot differ only in that respect, there must be some further difference on which that difference is based» (87). On Leibniz’s rejection of purely extrinsic denominations, see the following text (ca. 1701): «In complete things there is no denomination that is wholly extrinsic; nor is anything seen or known without being really affected and changed by that very fact, which constitutes an intrinsic denomination (*Denominatio prorsus extrinseca in rebus completis nulla est; neque aliquid videtur aut noscitur quin ea re afficiatur atque immutetur realiter, quod est intrinsecae denominationis*)» (LH IV 3, 5e, Bl. 15r).

38 Another point rightly emphasized by Curley (1976: 90), is that the fact that an individual belongs to the best possible world is not sufficient to conclude that such an individual exists: «It follows only given the further fact that God chooses to create the best possible world», i.e., from what has been called the principle of perfection; cf. A VI 4: 1454: «The first principle concerning existences is this proposition: *God wills that which is the most perfect*’. Such a proposition, says Leibniz, “is the origin of the passage from the possibility to the existence of creatures»; cf. also what he writes concerning contingent futures in the annotations to Twisse (Grua 351), where Leibniz explains that the *ratio scibilitatis* of contingent futures is partly given by the *cohaerentia terminorum* (the containment of the predicate in the subject), and partly from *optimitas generalis et decretum Dei optimum eligendi*.

leads him to be more and more inclined to regard existence as a perfection, or at least as something that results from perfection. This seems to be the position he holds in a late text (from around 1700):

We may compare our conception of position with that of existence. Existence is conceived by us as having nothing in common with essence; but this cannot be so, since there must be more in the concept of a thing which exists than in that of one which does not exist, that is, existence must be a perfection, since all that is explicable in existence is being an ingredient of the most perfect series of things. In the same way we conceive position as something extrinsic, which adds nothing to the thing posited, though it does add to the way in which it is affected by other things (C 9/MP 134)

This text, which represents one of Leibniz's most mature formulations on the topic, seems to explicitly contradict what Leibniz said in 1677 (albeit not what he says in his letter to Eckhard): existence is explicitly counted among perfections, and, moreover, «there must be more in the concept of the existent than in that of the non-existent». The parallel with *positio*, however, here serves to explain that both existence and position are conceived as «something extrinsic, which adds nothing to the thing», i.e., as an extrinsic determination.

Note that the paper from which the quotation above is taken is explicitly concerned with the claim that «there are no purely extrinsic determinations because of the interconnection of things». More specifically, Leibniz claims that «it is not possible for two things to differ from one another in respect of time and place alone, but [...] it is always necessary that there shall be some other internal difference», and «place, position, and quantity, such as number and proportion, are merely relations, and result from other things [...]» (C 8–9/MP 133)³⁹.

This is the context in which the digression on existence occurs. It explains why Leibniz promptly rejects the view that existence has nothing in common with essence, even though this is the way in which it is commonly conceived by us. Since there must be something more in the concept of an existing thing than in that of a non-existing one, and since this difference cannot consist just in a difference between existence and non-existence (granted that existence is a merely extrinsic denomination), it follows that this “something more” has to be found at the level of essence, i.e., in terms of perfection (maximal degree of essence).

A certain ambiguity is at work in the way in which the term “perfection” is employed by Leibniz (as I have remarked above). More specifically, one should explicitly distinguish between *perfection*, as a singular term, and *perfections*, as a plurality of notes or determinations a thing can have. When Leibniz remarks

39 In the critical edition, this piece will probably be published with the title *Nullas esse Denominationes Pure Extrinsicas ob Rerum Connectionem inter se* (LH IV, 1, 14c, Bl. 7). On the topic of extrinsic denominations, see Mugnai (1992: 49–55).

that existence could not be a perfection, indeed, he is claiming that existence cannot be regarded as one among the perfections a thing has (since each of them can be regarded either as possible or as existent).

Of course, the same criticism can be applied to the characterization of perfection as a “degree of reality”; in this case, however, the supposition of a fullest degree of essence – an absolute one, in the case of the most perfect being; a relative one, in the case of the most perfect world – allows Leibniz to conclude that «that which *exists* is also what is *the most perfect*», even though, properly speaking, the latter cannot be taken as an explanatory definition of the former (as he himself observes, «all that is explicable in existence is being an ingredient of the most perfect series of things»); but this does not mean that the two concepts are one and the same).

9.7. Coda. A Bias in Favour of Existence?

Leibniz’s theory of the striving possibles (discussed above) seems to be grounded in a sort of bias for existence over non-existence⁴⁰. This view is somewhat connected with Leibniz’s recovery of the ontological argument, for, as it has been pointed out, both Descartes and Leibniz believe that there is an *ontological bias* which favours existence over non-existence «at the fundamental level of reality» (Griffin 2013: 9). As Adams acknowledges, however, this view seems also to be in contrast with what Leibniz says in the *Principles of Nature and Grace* (1714), that the first metaphysical question one has to ask is “why is there something rather than nothing?”: «For nothing is simpler and easier than something» (GP VI 602/AG 210), from which it would follow that non-existence should be preferred to existence as far as presumption is concerned (see Adams 1994: 210).

This tension, however, can be weakened if we pay attention to the fact that the “something” which is said to be less easy than nothing is just the existence of the actual world, leaving God’s existence aside. On the other hand, if we include God in the domain of what is actual, we should say that what is created or has temporal and contingent existence must be ultimately grounded in something which has eternal and necessary existence, i.e., on God.

In other words, the kind of being or “something” which is said to be easier than nothing is in the other passages referred to as essential being, i.e., the essence of God and the natures of possible things (to which God confers a tendency towards existence). Leibniz does not always explicitly distinguish the essential sense of “something”/“nothing” from the existential sense. The existential sense of “nothing” (*le Néant*) is discussed, for instance, in the dialogue with Dobrzensky (January 1695), where it is clear that ‘nothing’ comprehends

40 Cf. Adams (1994: 202–205), and the passages discussed there.

whatever does not actually exist, and it is employed by Leibniz to explain the original limitation of things at the level of mere possibility⁴¹.

This idea is employed by Leibniz to make sense of the traditional view that the existence of things comes out of “nothing”, where, once again, what is nothing from the existential sense is, at the same time, “something” from the essential sense (actually, there is a sort of plenitude of being at the level of what is merely possible). Therefore, one must distinguish the absolute (or essential) sense of nothing from the relative (or existential) one. Then, the question posed in the *Principles of Nature and Grace* must be rephrased in terms of the reason why the world (or this world) exists rather than not (it is posed in this way at the beginning of *De Rerum Originatione Radicali*, GP VII 302).

41 «[Nothingness] is infinite, is eternal, and it has many attributes in common with God. It includes an infinity of things, for all things that do not exist are included in nothingness, and all things that are no longer have returned into nothingness» (A II 3: 12/AG 113).

Chapter 10. Modality and Ontology

Discussing the “puzzle of existence”, Francisco Suárez noted that «when a possible thing and a created thing are said to be the same numerically or specifically, if the discussion concerns real or positive identity, it is false [...]», because the identity at stake here would hold only between two real and positive elements, but essences before creation (the merely possible Peter) are nothing, and after creation they are just the same thing as the existent things (the actual Peter).

He concedes, however, that the possible and the actual Peter can be said to be one thing only in a negative sense, «because a producible thing and one produced are not two things, but one»; but «this negative unity or identity is apprehended by us in the manner of a positive type, because we compare a positive thing objectively existing in the intellect [the possible Peter] to the thing existing in act [the actual Peter] as if they were two positive extremes», whereas they are only one¹.

Then Suárez deals with the question of what existence adds to essence. The question is answered from the very beginning, where Suárez states that the distinction between an entity in act and one in potency corresponds to that between an entity and a non-entity, since the being in potency (what Suárez properly calls *potentia objectiva*) is not something real and positive, since «there is no reality (speaking properly of a positive and actual thing) in the possible essence before it is made»². On the part of creatures, there is only the creatures’ non-repugnance to be made in such-and-such a way, i.e., the pure being of the possible *qua* possible is just given by the absence of contradiction. The main task of Suárez, then, is to provide a sort of *reductio ad absurdum* of the thesis of a real distinction, and the argument is very similar to that adopted by Leibniz, i.e., that if one assumes that existence adds something real to a mere possible entity (i.e., existence is a *reality*), then one should distinguish also between a mere possible and an actual existence (see DM XXXI, iii, 7/Wells 71).

In a sense, then, Suárez should properly reject the possibility of talking of something like mere potential existence, since “existence” refers to what is actual only. Paradox notwithstanding, he does not refrain, however, from explicitly talking of both existence *in actu exercito* and existence *in actu signato*, i.e., potential existence³. A similar ambiguity can be found in Leibniz’s discussion of existence, as I will show in the next section.

1 DM XXXI, ii, 6/Wells 60–61.

2 DM XXXI, iii, 3/Wells 68. The specification between parenthesis is relevant, since Suárez, as we know, ultimately maintains that pure possibles are nothing from the existential point of view, but not from the essential point of view (their reality, therefore, is nothing, when reality is equated with actual existence). Cf. Chapter 2 above.

3 See DM XXXI, vii, 4–5, where he argues against the view that existence is a predicament: «But I think that existence as exercised in act is not properly located in a predicament, not

10.1. *Existentia Possibilis*. A Problematic Notion

Our point of departure will, once again, be Leibniz's discussion with Eckhard in 1677. In his first letter to Leibniz (dated April 1677), indeed, Eckhard defended the idea that existence is a perfection by insisting on the impossibility of a real distinction between essence and existence; which, however, seems to be interpreted by him in a very strong way, i.e., as a sort of quasi-identity between the two («But who conceives of essence, in that very same act [of thought], he cannot but conceive of existence as well; and vice versa»). At this point, Eckhard introduces a distinction between possible and actual *essence* on the one hand, and possible and actual *existence* on the other.

Essence and existence can be distinguished only when one compares possible essence with actual existence, and, in this sense, Eckhard too admits that essence and existence are really different. But just as actual essence and actual existence amount to one and the same thing, so too do possible essence and possible existence. He can therefore conclude that «the essence of a possible thing is itself possible existence, not some part or species of it. The same holds for the essence of an actual thing, which is itself actual existence, not a part or species of it» (A II 1²: 495).

The roots of Eckhard's position are to be found in Descartes, who, in his discussion of the ontological argument, stated that every essence involves existence, i.e., possible existence in the case of the essence of creatures, necessary existence in the case of the most perfect being⁴. This point will be repeated by Eckhard in his second letter to Leibniz (the very long letter of May 1677), in a passage where he defends once again the claim that actual existence is a perfection, maintaining that – since possible existence is a perfection (since it does not differ from possible being) – actual existence must be a perfection as well, because it does not differ from actual being; given that an actual being is more perfect than a possible one, moreover, actual existence will be more perfect than merely possible existence (see A II 1²: 510).

on account of his excellence [...], but because such an existence is not properly other than potential existence or existence conceived of in a designated act which is located in a predicament». Therefore, he concludes that one must say existence to be «located [in a predicament] insofar as it is something existing in designated act or as existing possibly (*collocari tamen nihilominus prout quod existens est in actu signato, seu ut possibiliter existens*)». From this, he draws the conclusion that a thing as existing in act «does not add a new thing or a new mode beyond that whole substance as possibly existing [...]. But rather it adds (so to speak) the whole substance itself (*seipsam totam*). For, when it was only in potency it was nothing and when it is in act the whole substance is something» (Wells 108–109).

4 Cf. the *Rationes* appended to Descartes' *Second Replies*: «Existence is contained in the idea or concept of every single thing, since we cannot conceive of anything except as existing. Possible or contingent existence is contained in the concept of a limited thing, whereas necessary and perfect existence is contained in the concept of a supremely perfect being» (AT VII: 166/CSM II: 117).

In his marginal annotations on Eckhard's letter, Leibniz does not discuss the alleged validity of the argument, but focuses his criticism on the very same plausibility of the notion of *existentia possibilis*: «When I speak of existence, I speak of what is actual. For existence is opposed to essence, or the possibility of existing (*Quando de existentia loquor, loquor de actuali, opponitur enim essentiae, seu possibilitati existendi*)» (A II 1²: 510 fn12)⁵. If existence refers to actuality, and only to that, then talking of “possible existence” would be as absurd as talking of actuality-without-actuality.

This criticism will be repeated, almost ten years later, in the context of Leibniz's discussion of existence in the *General Inquiries*:

But the question is, however, what “existent” means, for clearly an existent is a being, i.e., a possible and something else. All things considered, however, I do not see what is conceived in “existent” other than some degree of being, since it can be applied to various beings. I do not wish to say, however, that the existence of something is its being possible, i.e., its possible existence, because this is simply the essence itself. We understand existence, instead, as actual, i.e., as something added to possibility or essence, whereas in the above sense, possible existence would be the same as actuality separated from actuality, which is absurd. (A VI 4: 762–763/GI 85)

This criticism moves from the point of view of what I have called “Leibnizian actualism”, i.e., the principle that, properly speaking, everything there is, is actual (or can be ultimately reduced to something actual). The question, however, cannot be resolved in such a simple way, because Leibniz himself will refer several times (in an explicit or implicit manner) to something like “possible existence”.

The most striking case occurs in a paper written less than one year later than the note to Eckhard quoted above. In a text devoted to a reformulation of the ontological argument moving from the concept of necessary being, Leibniz writes: «Possible existence, or the possibility of a certain thing, and the essence of that very same thing are inseparable (*Existentia possibilis seu Possibilitas rei alicujus, et ejusdem rei essentia sunt inseparabiles*)» (Jan. 1678, A II 1²: 588).

This notion of possible existence, however problematic, seems at the same time to have something to do with Leibniz's account of the possibles' *exigentia existentiae*, which I have already introduced in the previous chapter. According to Wolfgang Janke, Leibniz's criticism of the notion of possible existence has to

5 Cf. Leibniz's later remarks on Spinoza's *Principia Philosophiae*, probably drafted around 1691, available in the *Voraussetzung* of A VI 5: «*existentiam omnes intelligimus de actuali*». And, in another marginal note: «by the name of existence philosophers understand act, and by the name of essence possibility. But here existence is taken as broadly as entity, with an unnecessary change in the usage of terms (*existentiae nomine philosophi intelligunt actum, essentiae nomine possibilitatem. Hic vero existentia tam late sumitur quam entitas, non necessaria mutatione usus vocum*)». *Randbemerkungen und Unterstreichungen zu Spinoza, Principia Philosophiae more geometrico demonstrata*, VE N. 3775.

be interpreted as the claim that one cannot immediately conclude that *existentia possibilis* constitutes the same as the *possibilitas existendi*, but a link between these two notions must be provided (Janke 1963: 280–281).

Such a situation, however, is not limited to this particular text only, since, as we have seen when studying the internal structure of the world as a *series rerum*, Leibniz continuously refers to elements which belong to the domain of what exists (*existentia*, spatiotemporal relations, causal connections, relations of connection, positional differences, and so on), and do not pertain to the field of general essences (*essentia*); but, nonetheless, they are not just a prerogative of the actual world alone, but of every possible world. The very same notion of a “possible individual”, indeed, seems to refer to (and to involve) that of possible existence.

Leibniz himself cannot refrain from employing the notion of possible existence in this sense, as one can see from the following passage of the *New Essays*, where the notion of “truth” is taken into consideration:

It is true that I have also attributed truth to ideas, by saying that ideas are either true or false; but what I mean by that is the truth of the proposition which affirms that the object of the idea is possible. *And in that sense one could also say that an entity is true, i.e., [attribute truth to] the proposition which affirms its actual or at least possible existence.* (NE IV, v, §1, A VI 6: 398, italics mine)

One can detect a certain tension within Leibniz’s system, therefore, between (1) the actualist strand defended in passages like those I have commented in Chapter 7 above, and (2) the necessity of an enriched ontology, one which takes into account not only actual individuals and general essences, but possible individuals as well (i.e., possible existence)⁶.

6 Cf. Rauzy (2001: 120–125). In particular, he emphasizes the contrast between what he calls the univocity of the term “existence” defended at the end of 1676 (Leibnizian actualism) with the commitment to the existence of *entia necessaria*, like eternal truths and propositions, in the texts of August 1677, *De Veritatibus Necessariis seu aeternis* (A VI 4: 17) and *De Veritatis Realitate* (A VI 4, 18–19), in which necessary propositions (about mathematical essences) are regarded as *entia necessaria*; cf. also a crossed-out passage in a table of definitions from around 1688–89: «*A* is said to be *necessary* if a *non-existent A* is impossible. Such necessary beings are many, even though only God is a necessary substance. But there are also necessary truths, and, thus, one could say that, even if there is no circle, nonetheless the fact that the angle in the semicircle must be right exists, i.e., it is a necessary being; but it belongs to the kind of incomplete beings» (A VI 4: 931, crit. app., ll. 12ff). In all these passages, Leibniz seems to assume a Platonist point of view, according to which existence (in a very broad sense) can be ascribed to both abstract and concrete entities. Substances are the only concrete things, and substantiality is characterized in terms of conceptual completeness, whereas propositions are regarded as abstract entities, where abstraction is interpreted in terms of conceptual incompleteness.

10.2. Existence: Modal vs. Ontological Sense

To the best of my knowledge, the only serious attempt to dissolve this tension has been sketched by Martin Schneider, who resorted to an ingenious distinction between a modal and an ontological characterization of existence⁷. As its point of departure, Schneider's reflection moves from the way in which Leibniz distinguishes between concrete and abstract entities; the distinction, according to Schneider, between the concrete and abstract according to their *ontological status* should not be confused with their distinction according to their *modal status*.

From the ontological point of view, the relevant distinction is that between the *concrete* and the *abstract*, which is not a modal one, and that, moreover, makes abstraction from the modal status, i.e., from the fact whether a concrete thing is an actual or a merely possible one. Only concrete things, i.e., individuals with their individual accidents can be ascribed absolute reality (they are *res* in a proper sense), whereas abstract entities are just *rerum modi*. This is the first sense in which, according to Schneider, one has to understand the distinction between existence and possibility: «In contrast to the real existence (*wirklichen Existenz*) of the *entia concreta*, the way of being of the *entia abstracta* is only that of reality in the sense of possibility or essentiality» (Schneider 1974: 168).

The ontological status of concrete entities, however, must not be confused with their modal status. The ontological status of concrete vs. abstract entities is the same in every possible world. Therefore, what is characteristic of concrete entities (but not of abstract entities) is that they are endowed with a possibility for independent existence, which does not, however, immediately correspond with their actual existence in the (actual) world, since it is sufficient that they have possible existence only, i.e., that they exist in a sub-optimal possible world (or, better still, they would have existed, had God chosen to actualize that world).

In this sense, there is a sort of mismatch between the notion of existence taken in the ontological and that taken in the modal sense, since the first stands for substantiality, the second for actuality⁸. The ontological distinction between abstract and concrete entities, therefore, should not be confused with the modal distinction between the possible and the actual.

⁷ See Schneider (1974: 168–169).

⁸ Cf. Schneider (1974: 169): «One can also say: *entia concreta* are independent entities, which have either actual existence or possible existence in one of the possible worlds. *Entia abstracta*, to the contrary, do not have the possibility of an independent existence in the sense of their absolute reality. They can exist as independent entities neither in the actual world nor in any of the possible worlds. [...] Their reality, indeed, is always derivative and dependent on the actual or possible existence of independent entities». I will argue below that abstract entities for Leibniz are necessarily abstract.

According to the former, both actual and possible individuals are *real* (i.e., concrete) entities, whereas general essences, taken in themselves (isolated from primary substances) are just *ideal* (i.e., abstract) entities. Note that this is the main reason why Leibniz understands the latter as if they were the same in (or at) every possible world. According to the modal distinction, only actual contingent individuals exist in the actual world, whereas merely possible individuals seem to have the same modal status of general essence, i.e., they are simply possible. I shall come back to the last point in the next paragraph, where a certain ambiguity in Leibniz's way of talking of possibilities (specific essences vs. individual essences) will be taken into consideration.

Let me first emphasize that, when coming to Leibniz's rejection of possible existence in section 73 of the *General Inquiries*, Schneider's reading seems to be an extremely restrictive one: Leibniz himself, according to Schneider, would be confused, i.e., he would not distinguish too clearly between the ontological and the modal perspective. When Leibniz distinguishes between *possible* and *actual existence*, it seems that he is referring to the modal difference between a concrete thing existing in the actual world and a concrete thing existing in a merely possible one; but, at the same time, concrete existence in a merely possible world is immediately equated with the abstract way of being of an essence, which, as Schneider remarks, is true only in a modal but not in an ontological sense⁹.

The confusion denounced by Schneider can be alleviated by taking into account the fact that Leibniz seems sometimes to employ two different notions of *abstraction* as well; according to the notion which the Schoolmen called *cognitio abstractiva*, possible individuals could also be regarded as abstract entities, where abstraction is only abstraction-from-existence. I think that Schneider's extremely sharp diagnosis of the problem can be usefully integrated within the considerations concerning the development of Leibniz's ideas as presented in the previous chapters of this book.

As I have shown above, the modal problem for the early Leibniz was not a prominent issue, because, given his commitment to full-fledged nominalism, the distinction between purely possible and actual individuals amounts to a distinction between merely imaginary entities and real ones. Since purely possible entities had, properly speaking, no ontological status at all, the question of actual existence and that of the existence of *subsistentia* (concrete and independent entities) amounted to one and the same thing. In other terms, the notion of the concrete and that of the actual were coextensive, and it seems that Leibniz was not too worried about the question of whether this coextensiveness amounted to an identity or not.

The notion of a possible individual (complete individual concept), however, brings with itself the idea of the possible worlds which it inhabits, i.e., of

9 Cf. Schneider (1974:169–170 fn13).

a *series of things* alternative to the actual one. Leibniz's insistence on the novel argument is particularly interesting in this sense. The favourite example for a merely possible thing, indeed, is a fictional entity. However, as I have said, the novel argument will be retained by Leibniz even in his mature period. Fictional entities, however, typically represent incomplete beings, i.e., objects (or bearers of properties) which are undetermined in many respects. Possible worlds, by contrast, are supposed to be made out of complete individual concepts, and a possible world is taken as a representation of the complete history of the world (not just a partial representation of it).

According to the young Leibniz's approach, existence (which was clearly equated with "actuality"), was extruded from the domain of demonstrative knowledge based on definitions and demonstrations, i.e., on concepts and propositions. Existence, however, regarded only singular and concrete entities, while demonstrations regarded only abstract and general essences, or, better still, connections between general essences. Existential statements thus could not be derived analytically from the nature of things. While originally excluded from the domain of analytical knowledge, the contingent and individual features of things will be included in Leibniz's account of substance in terms of complete concepts, for a complete concept involves not only *essentialia* but also *existentialia*.

If the problems connected with the notion of existence cannot be resolved (whether it has to be placed inside or outside the complete concept of an individual), it can at least be made understandable in terms of Leibniz's trouble when trying to find a perfect match between the ontological and the modal account. Perhaps, this is the reason why, in his account of existence, Leibniz shifts from actuality in the proper sense to what makes an individual (a world) worthy of existence, i.e., its degree of perfection. The latter, but not the former, indeed, can be said to result from the qualities and determinations of a thing contained in the complete concept of an individual's degree of perfection.

10.3. The Ontological Subject in *De Cogitationum Analysisi*

This point can be confirmed by the analysis of an important text from the very beginning of the Hanoverian period. It is a table of definitions, which the editors have entitled *De Cogitationum Analysisi*, where, at a certain point, Leibniz adds some further reflections on the notion of an (ontological) subject. The notion of the ultimate subject is derived by considering the ways in which it differs from the notion of an attribute: I can think of "heat" (*calor*) without taking into account any "hot thing" (*calidum*), but I cannot conceive of "this heat" (i.e., this particular, individual accident) without thinking of some hot thing at the same time.

Or again, as Leibniz writes:

Of course, I can think of a circle, as a thing possible in itself, or which does not imply a contradiction; but, if I wish to know whether a circle exists now, and if I want to know it *a priori*, I am forced to presuppose many other things beside this, and, first of all, I am forced to presuppose the transition from the circle and the properties which follow from its nature to other things, i.e., to the circular subject [*literally*: “the subject of the circle”]. For the essence of the circle, taken in itself, can be resolved into its causes, until the first ones; from that, however, I cannot judge whether a circle exists or not; for there are certain differences which cannot be derived from forms: these are the difference between a big and a small circle, or the question whether there is only one circle or many, or whether it exists or not. When I have discovered that a circle is possible, indeed, I can ask whether something is possible, which involves a plurality of things [...]. Hence it is clear that the ultimate subject is a complete entity (*Ens completum*), which involves the whole nature of things, i.e., such that from the perfect understanding of it (having understood those aspects which can discern it from all the other things), it can be concluded which possibles do exist. (ca. 1678–81, A VI 4: 2770)

The main aim of this passage is the characterization of the ultimate subject as a complete being or complete entity, a point Leibniz had already sketched in a short note written at the end of 1676, where individual substance had been characterized in terms of its ontological (not conceptual) completeness, i.e., as something «which involves all things, i.e., for the perfect understanding of which the understanding of no other thing is required» (A VI 3: 400). Also in that case, this characterization of a substance was contrasted with that of a figure, i.e., of something having an abstract nature, for the perfect understanding of which something else has to be understood¹⁰.

10 The distinction between subject (concrete) and attribute (abstract) is also important to correctly understand Leibniz's mature ontology grounded in the notion of force. As he writes in a letter to Pellisson of January 1692: «The word “substance” can be taken in two ways – for the subject itself and the essence of the subject. [...] Hence when it is said that primitive force constitutes the substance of bodies, their nature or essence is understood [...]. Thus, no one could object if the substance *in abstracto* is taken to be the primitive force which always remain the same in the same body and brings about, successively, accidental forces [...]. Nevertheless it is true that the substance *in concreto* is something other than force, because it is the subject taken with this force» (A II 2: 486–487; in Sleight 1990: 97–98). There are many other passages where Leibniz clearly shows that he considers primitive forces as abstract entities, while it is unequivocally true that substances count as concrete beings. See for example a table of definitions (after 1700), where substance is defined as a concrete being, while an accident is said to be «an abstract derivative being, which is opposed to the primitive or constitutive abstract, which the Schools call substantial form and, with Aristotle's terminology, could be called primary entelechy» (C 438). The notion of active force (or primitive entelechy), therefore, cannot replace the notion of the ontological subject, as suggested by Jorati (2018). In his 1698 *De Ipsa Natura*, Leibniz still resorts to the Scholastic dictum *actiones*

In the text quoted above, however, something more is added, i.e., the fact that an abstract entity, even when resolved into its most basic attributes (like the concepts constituting the definition of the circle), cannot provide us with an answer to questions concerning all those differences which cannot be derived from forms, i.e., those concerning quantitative properties, numerical identity, and existence. In order to answer this question, one must shift from the circle and the properties derivable from its (general) essence to the circular thing (*subiectum circuli*). This means that, from the nature of a singular substance, an omniscient mind would be able to derive everything which is compossible with that substance. Interestingly enough, the notion of existence is employed to characterize those “haecceitistic” properties which cannot be captured at the level of general essences. This point can also be argued from the fact that Leibniz explicitly juxtaposes the question concerning the possibility of the circle *in se* with the question concerning the *present existence* of the circle¹¹.

In this way, Leibniz concludes that «an individual is that, the understanding of which involves the understanding of the existence of things (*Individuum autem est cuius intelligentia involvit intelligentiam existentiae rerum*)»¹². The universal, on the other hand, is «that, the understanding of which involves possibilities only». As one can see, the distinction between individuality and universality is explained in terms of that between, respectively, existence and possibility. A singular thing, which is the same as an individual, is also characterized as «that, from the understanding of which one can judge whether and when and where it exists, and if it exists alone or with others, and, in a word, the whole totality of things» (A VI 4: 2770–2771).

In a marginal remark appended to the definition of *connected things* as those which mutually involve the existence of each other, Leibniz points out again at the difference between knowledge of essence and knowledge of existence:

Notice that one thing is to think of the essence, another to think of existence. And to think of possible existence is nothing else than to think of existence. But demonstrating a possibility is another thing. I do not conceive of the heat as possible, unless insofar as I conceive a certain subject as existing. I cannot distinctly conceive of the existence of heat without conceiving the concept of a cause. (A VI 4: 2769 fn4)

sunt suppositorum («actions belong to subjects»), cf. GP IV 509/AG 160, which he had already mentioned in the *Discourse*, § 8, A VI 4: 1540/AG 40. Cf. also Fichant (1997b).

11 Cf. also *Inquirenda Logico-Metaphysica*, ca. 1689–90: «every complete being involves all other existents. [...] It must be considered whether every individual, even an accident, does not also involve all other existents, since it involves its own subject» (A VI 4: 998).

12 Cf. A VI 4: 875: «For every existent thing involves all the other coexisting things (*Omne enim existens involvit omnia quibus coexistit*)». Other passages are discussed in Mondadori (1994: 86 fn29).

Here, possible existence is equated with existence, and contrasted with essence. As Stefano Di Bella observes, «the boundary between the two spheres (say, the essential and the existential) does not properly coincide, despite all appearances, with the one between the possible and the actual»¹³. In this sense, existence is explained in terms of compossibility, but, as already said, this is a notion that holds for every possible world, not just for the actual one; even though these two notions, of course, are not unrelated, since the actual world is ultimately described as the most perfect among the many sets of compossible things.

10.4. Possible Individuals: An Attributive Reading

Terminological questions aside, I think there is a sense in which Leibniz is justified in distinguishing between a notion of possible existence which should be rejected, and an alternative notion of possible existence that should, to the contrary, be accepted within his system.

In Chapter 2 above, I have shown how the young Leibniz, influenced by Thomasius, rejected the notion of “potential being” in the sense of the Schoolmen’s *ens nominaliter sumptum*, i.e., the essential notion of being:

Potential being can be called “being” (*Ens*) only in an inappropriate way. [...] It will be enough to say that being in potency is in potency only by changing the meaning of the term (*termino alienante*), as a husband in potency is not a husband. If the author [Stahl] wants to maintain the expression “potential being”, he should explain it not as if it were in potency with respect to being (*ens*), but, rather, with respect to existence (*existere*). (A VI 1: 23)

As said above, Leibniz is endorsing what we would call an *attributive reading* of potential being against a *predicative reading*. Later on, he would change his mind about the reliability of the notion of *essentia realis* (or the nominal sense of being), accepting the idea that the absence of contradiction of a concept is enough to capture an essence at the level of what is purely possible. As it is characteristic of many aspects of his thought, however, the idea behind the remark in the passage quoted above will be retained by him, and re-interpreted in terms of a theory of existential possibility, one in which potential being is said to be potential «not in respect to essence but to [actual] existence».

The main idea is that *possible* in “possible individual” (or “possible world”) has to be taken as a shorthand for “possibly existing individual” (or “possibly existing world”), and that this notion of existential possibility is the same as that of “possible existence”, and that both of them are to be read attributively, not predicatively. Coherently with his rejection of modal realism, Leibniz can, in

13 Di Bella (2005a: 92); see also 96–97, where Di Bella explains that, as universal connection is understood as a notion that explains spatiotemporal location (and as discernibility is a notion that explains numerical distinction), so compossibility is the notion that explains existence.

other words, both reject and accept the idea of “possible existent things”. The predicative reading of “possible”, indeed, is correctly rejected since it would commit him to the existence of merely possible *things* (i.e., to a form of modal realism), but the attributive reading, to the contrary, might well be accepted, for merely possible things are no longer things in a proper sense. A merely possible individual is not an individual but a *complete concept*: what, according to the material way of speech, is said to be a possible individual should be properly understood, in the formal way of speech, as an individual concept¹⁴. The expression “possible individual” is a sort of abbreviation for “something which, were it to exist (were it to be created by God), would be an individual”.

In this sense, if we take a Leibnizian possible individual – say, the possible Peter – , he could have failed to be actual (since God could have created another world) and, therefore, he could have failed to exist, i.e., to be an actual individual. In this sense, a merely possible Peter *is not* an individual (in flesh and bones), he *is not* born from such and such parents, he has never denied Jesus, and so on; all those things can be said of him only in a counterfactual way.

Were we to assume, indeed, that God has in fact created a world which does not contain Peter, all that we could say is that, had God created the world to which (the complete concept of) Peter belongs, Peter would have been actual, i.e., he would have been born from such and such parents, denied Jesus, and so on. In particular, we can ascribe to him all those individual and *haecceitistic* properties, such as spatiotemporal and causal determinations, which, by contrast, could never be ascribed to a mere abstract object, like a triangle. Peter, on the other hand, could never have failed to be Peter, since “to be Peter”, in this case, means just to have a complete concept such and such; this also means that, every change (even the smallest) in the complete concept of Peter would modify his individual essence as well, i.e., would make it the complete concept of another individual, not of that very same Peter.

Two different concepts of possibility are at work in Leibniz’s philosophy: one is the concept of mere logical possibility (or, also, pre-existential possibility). The other is the existential (or post-existential) notion of possibility which is implicitly contained in the notion of “merely possible individual” (or “merely possible world”), and has been employed to make sense of the notion of possible existence (it corresponds to what Leibniz dubs *Existurientia*).

In *De Libertate et Necessitate*, for instance, Leibniz originally introduces the notion of possibility without defining it, but saying only that he holds «a notion

14 On this point, see the remarks of Mates (1989: 176–177). Something like the distinction between formal and material modes of speech plays a fundamental role here. Such a distinction, which we usually associate with Carnap’s theory of semantical ascent, corresponds to the use/mention distinction and, as such, was widely employed even in the Scholastic debates (cf. the distinction between *in actu signato* and *in actu exercito*). On the distinction between the formal and the material significate, cf. Nuchelmans (1986: 223ff).

of possibility and necessity according to which there are some things which are possible, but yet not necessary, and which do not really exist», i.e., the possible is characterized as what is not necessary, that is, not necessarily actualized. Two paragraphs later, he explicitly characterizes the possible in the following way (a): «we must hold that everything possible is what involves some degree of perfections, and, moreover, that the possible that occurs (*contingere*) is the one more perfect than its opposite [...]». In these lines, then, Leibniz distinguishes the merely possible from the contingent, i.e., that which is actual but not necessary. The possible is said, moreover, to involve some degree of perfection, and perfection is equated with «essence or an *exigentia existentia*» (A VI 4: 1445–1446/AG 20). This characterization (a) corresponds to the existential (or post-existential) account of possibility, where “possible” means “possibly actual”.

In the same text, however, Leibniz adds a further characterization (b): «a possible thing is something with some essence or reality, that is, something that can be distinctly understood». The example is that of a pentagon, which would remain possible even if we were to imagine that no exact pentagon would ever happen to exist *in rerum natura* (A VI 4: 1447/AG 21). It is true that these two definitions of possibility have in common the reference to “essence” or “reality”, but, whereas essence, in (a), is explicitly characterized in terms of an exigency to exist, according to (b) it is said to be «something which can be distinctly understood».

Now, (a) and (b) are not to be taken as immediately equivalent, at least from the intensional point of view. According to (b), indeed, all the possibles are equally possible, i.e., they are all on the same level, being just non-contradictory concepts. According to (a), on the other hand, there are *degrees of possibility*, i.e., degrees of perfection or quantity of essences, since not all the possibles are equally perfect, or, as Leibniz says, each of them tends towards existence with a force which is proportional to their degree of perfection.

If Leibniz did not accurately distinguish between (a) and (b), however, this is because what is possible according to (a) has to be taken as coextensive with what is possible according to (b). In other words, what possesses a tendency toward existence, i.e., what is possible according to (b), is just and only what has an essence (is real) according to (a), i.e., those concepts whose notion is free from a contradiction. The difference between these two accounts, (a) and (b), is implicitly taken into account by Leibniz, when he acknowledges that there is no reason why some possibles must be endowed with a tendency towards existence while others do not have such a tendency, because all that is required in order to have such a tendency (*Existurientia*) is their being “really” possible, i.e., having an essential reality according to (b), a point of view from which all the possibles are on a par¹⁵. But to the contrary, it is only because a certain group of com-

15 A VI 4: 1363; 1443; 1617n: «And so all beings, insofar as they are involved in the First Being, have – beyond bare possibility – some tendency (*Itaque omnia Entia quatenus involvuntur in primo Ente,*

possible things (a certain “series of things”) is more perfect than all the others that it has been chosen by God to be created, i.e., to pass into actual existence.

The distinction between (a) and (b) might also explain why, after having carefully distinguished the logical sense of possibility from the temporal/causal sense, which can be ascribed only to compossible things, Leibniz seems to be brought back to a causal or quasi-causal account of purely possible things. Making sense of reference to a “quasi-causal” account of possible things can be done (only) from the point of view of Leibniz’s strategy of “possible decrees”, i.e., the idea that possible worlds (and possible individuals) are distinguished from the possibility of general essences because the former involve a reference to divine decrees taken as possible, while the latter does not.

This point is posited in an explicitly tentative way in the last paragraph of *De Libertate et Gratia*:

It can be said, perhaps, that divine decrees (*voluntates divinas*) are contained also in the purely possible ideas, and the concurrence toward existence insofar as these are possibles, or the very same formal reason of existence, has a certain essence. But, therefore, it would follow that a new existential being must be required. The formal reason of the existence of contingent things is to please a necessary being. But is it possible that also those things which do not exist please a necessary being? Of course, it is possible, but it is not possible that they should please him more [than others]. Therefore, it is not possible that they exist. This difficulty must be solved. (A VI 4: 1460)

This is one of the few passages in which Leibniz discusses the question of the “formal reason” of existence (see Chapter 8 above). Remember that causality and existence are closely connected, and the same holds for existence and divine will. Insofar as possible worlds include possible individuals, and not only general essences, it seems that they should involve divine decrees (or *divinae voluntates*) as well. But, once again, this seems to place existence among merely possible things, to the effect that, in order to explain the transition from possibility to actuality, another concept of existence would be required.

The same problem will be raised by Leibniz from the theological point of view in one of his remarks on Arminian theology, tentatively dated to around

praeter nudam possibilitatem *habent aliquam propensionem* [...], emphasis mine); GP VII 289: «But the cause that makes something exist, or that makes a possibility demand existence, also causes every possible thing to have a striving toward existence, *since in general a reason for restricting this to certain possibles cannot be found (Sed quae causa facit ut aliquid existat, seu ut possibilitas exigat existentiam, facit etiam ut omne possibilem habeat conatum ad Existentiam, cum ratio restrictionis ad certa possibilia in universali reperire non possit, emphasis mine)*». The idea, therefore, is that, all the possibles, insofar as they are (logically) possible, have a reality (an ontological status) as well, i.e., a tendency towards existence (given by God): they tend towards existence *pari jure* insofar as they are all (logically) possible, but not all of them exist because the “force” with which they tend towards existence is in function of their degree of perfection (which is not the same for all possible worlds). On the analogy with force, see *De Affectibus*, A VI 4: 1434–1435.

1691–95. In this text, Leibniz takes into consideration an objection raised by the Arminian theologian Arnold Poelenburgh. Poelenburgh denies that what is purely possible should be considered a being (*ens*).

To this, Leibniz replies:

It seems to me that this [rejection of the ontological status of the possible] is not the real point of the question, for it is sufficient that truths about possible things are rooted in divine understanding. But you will object to me: one can also conceive the very same actual decree (*decretum de existendo*) as merely possible (*sub ratione possibilitatis*), and so on, to infinity. I concede that. For God exercises all his reflexive activities simultaneously and at once (*Deus omnes actus reflexos simul ac semel exercet*). (Grua 345)¹⁶

The actual decree is the *fiat*, the act by means of which God decrees that a certain possible world must exist (i.e., be actualized). The objection, then, is always the same: if this very same decree, i.e., the theological counterpart of the existence of the world, can be already conceived *sub ratione possibilitatis*, it will follow that another actual decree is required in order to pass to existence; but, again, this new decree can be thought as possible as well, and so on. Interestingly, Leibniz concedes this kind of infinite regress to his opponent, but says that it is not a dangerous one, since God's reflexive acts, which we understand as numerically distinct activities (and also temporally distinct activities), are exercised by him "all at once". This, in particular, should be the case when we are discussing the distinction between merely possible decrees and the actual one.

The theology of the possible decrees, then, is tightly intertwined with the topic of possible existence, or, more precisely, is just the theological formulation of the latter (or, if you prefer, possible existence is the metaphysical formulation of the theology of the possible decrees). In this sense, the very same notion of existence (purely possible existence), is already contained, of course, in the idea of possible individuals, whereas the possibility of general essences is

16 Poelenburgh also argued that a possible individual cannot be the object of divine action before it is created. Leibniz disagrees because God «could not establish anything about a creatable individual unless he has previously taken into account *the whole condition of this individual, or, as I usually say, his complete concept*. Otherwise, he would judge about something which he had not previously taken into account. If he decided to create a certain human being, endowed with certain qualities, this is not sufficient to conclude that he decided to create Adam, for it is necessary to restrict these qualities up to the individual nature. And in that universe, those things which God wants to establish about Adam, or bestow upon Adam, are connected to the whole of mankind and, indeed, to the whole universe. Therefore, God did not decide anything even about the smallest thing in the universe before having considered the whole possible world in order to decide if he has to create this rather than another universe. Therefore, the object of the divine decree is not a [generic] human being, but the whole series of possible things which constitute this universe with all its states (past, present, and futures) taken together» (Grua 345, italics mine). Once again, Leibniz still refers to his theory of complete concepts in the 1690s.

explicitly thought of as independent from existence (be it actual or merely possible existence)¹⁷. From the theological point of view, it can be characterized as the transition from the level of divine understanding *stricto sensu* to the level of divine wisdom, i.e., something intermediate between understanding and (actualizing) divine will, which corresponds to the level of possible worlds (collections of possible individuals).¹⁸

10.5. Possibilities vs. Possible Individuals

In this section, I will consider some ambiguities concerning Leibniz's way of employing the term *possibile*. Leibniz, indeed, never explicitly distinguishes between discussion of possibles as ideal beings (abstract, incomplete things, specific essences, etc.), like mathematical concepts, and discussion of possibles as possible individuals (complete concepts of non-actualized creatures).

Such a distinction, however, is of the utmost importance for a correct understanding of Leibniz's metaphysics. When talking about space and time as continuous magnitudes, for instance, he often says that they are mere ideal entities since continuity holds only at the level of the possible, not of the actual. Ideal things, says Leibniz, i.e., entities like «time, extension, motion, and the continuum in general, as we understand them in mathematics [...] express possibilities, just as do numbers» (GP IV 568/L 583).

In the same text, he also adds that

space and time taken together constitute the order of possibilities of the one entire universe, so that these orders [...] relate not only to what actually is but also to anything that could be put in its place, just as numbers are indifferent to the things which can be enumerated. This inclusion of the possible with the existent makes a continuity which is uniform and indifferent to every division. It is true that perfectly uniform change, such as the mathematical idea of motion, is never found in nature any more than are actual figures which possess in full force the

17 Cf. Gueroult (1946: 241–244), where Gueroult distinguishes between *essences* and *substances*. Essences are related to possibles in themselves, apart from their distribution into worlds, whereas substances presuppose existence. The transition to possible worlds requires the transition from the merely logical space of all possibilities to the idea of a *possible creation*, which brings with itself the very same idea of *existence*.

18 This may be the sense in which, in §225 of the *Theodicy*, Leibniz speaks of the relation between God's wisdom and possible worlds. There, indeed, Leibniz says that «divine wisdom does not exceed the possibles extensively, since the objects of the understanding cannot go beyond the possible», but «it exceeds them intensively, by reason of the infinitely infinite combinations it makes thereof, and its many deliberations concerning them. The wisdom of God, not content with embracing all the possibles, penetrates them, compares them, weighs them one against the other, to estimate their degrees of perfection or imperfection [...]. By these means, the divine Wisdom *distributed all the possibles it had already contemplated separately, into so many universal systems which he further compares the one with the others*» (GP VI: 252/H 271, italics mine); see also my remarks in §6 of the Introduction above.

properties which we learn in geometry, because the actual world does not remain in this indifference of possibilities but arises from the actual division or pluralities whose results are the phenomena which are presented in practice and which differ from each other to their smallest parts¹⁹.

Space and time are ascribed to the domain of possibilities, insofar as they are ideal and not real things, continuous and not discrete. Just like numbers, they are indifferent to the things which can be ordered through them. This means, if I am not mistaken, that their possibility consists in their *indeterminacy*: possibility as indeterminacy (i.e., the potential for many different divisions, as when the same segment can be divided into two, three, four parts, etc.) is contrasted with actuality as *determinacy*. For «the actual world does not remain in this indifference of possibilities but arises from the actual division» of things up to their smallest parts. This is the sense in which Leibniz contrasts the potential infinity which holds at the level of ideal entities with the actual infinite division of matter, which, ultimately, is something discrete.

As has been correctly pointed out, indeed, the term “ideal” has three inter-related marks for Leibniz; an ideal entity, (1) is something which is never fully realized (as in the case of mathematical entities); (2) it refers to possibles as well as to actuals (insofar as they are possible); (3) its existence is only an existence-in-the-understanding (or, as in the case of geometrical notions, also in the imagination). As McRae correctly concludes, however, if possibles are ideal in the sense of (1), they are not “possible existents”²⁰.

A possible individual, on the other hand, can be non-actual in an altogether different sense, i.e., if it is not one among the complete concepts which belong to the best possible world (or, which is the same, if it is a member of a non-actual world). But a possible individual (think, again, of the complete concept of Peter) can be fully realized, and, if it belongs to the world God has chosen to create, it is also fully realized. It is not something like an imperfect copy of a sort of Platonic model, for, as we already know, there can be no difference between the concept of Peter taken as possible and the concept of Peter as actual. Its own existence is not a matter of degrees: either it exists (belonging to the best possible world) or it does not (being a still completely determined complete individual concept)²¹.

19 Réponse aux Réflexions Contenues dans la seconde Edition du Dictionnaire Critique de M. Bayle, GP IV 568/L583.

20 McRae (1986: 85). McRae’s threefold characterization is based on what Leibniz says about the notion of space, but it can be generalized to all kinds of abstract and ideal notions as well.

21 When Bourguet writes (GP III 584) that time and instants concern only existing things, Leibniz adds a remark between the lines of the letter: «*le temps regarde aussi les existences possibles*» (LBr 103, Bl. 34v); cf. also GP VII 564: «An imaginary possible participates in these bases of order [space and time] as much as an actual thing, and it will be possible for a novel to be as well ordered with regard to places and times as a true history» (LTS 338).

As Leibniz clearly writes to Arnauld, the notions of species (which are the most abstract) contains only eternal or necessary truths; the notions, on the other hand, of individual substances («which are complete and can completely distinguish their subject» from all the other possible subjects), «involve [...] contingent or factual truths, and the individual circumstances of time, places as well as other ones».²² In a later text, Leibniz notes that «creatures are considered by the divine intellect conditionally, in the realm of possibility, together with the circumstances that would be needed if the creatures were ordained to exist (*Nam in rerum possibilitate Creaturae conditionaliter considerantur ab intellectu divino, una cum iis, quae ipsis convenirent, si existere ponerentur*)» (A IV 9: 627–628/DPG 95).

The main reason for distinguishing between abstract and concrete possibilities, is that they possess different modal properties: abstract possibilities are necessarily non-actual, whilst individual possibilities (or possible individuals) are only contingently non-actual. The main difference I want to introduce is that between (a) entities which, however not actual (they are not members of this world) are still contingently non-actual, for possible individuals are said to be “possible” in the sense of being “possibly actual”; and (b) entities which are not actual and cannot be actual in any possible world, since whatever can be actual is an individual, i.e., a concrete, and these are not concrete but abstract objects.

Entities of type (b) are abstract entities like numbers, ideas, propositions, or, also, mathematical objects in general, specific essences, and so on. These entities must be carefully distinguished from entities of type (a), which are possible individuals. The latter are contingently non-actual, for they could have been actual, if God had created another world. The former, by contrast, are said to be necessarily non-actual, not only because they are not actualized in every possible world (for possible worlds are inhabited by possible individuals only), but also because they are entities which lack actuality by their own nature. Again, an individual essence (a possible individual) involves a tendency towards actual existence, whereas essences as abstract possibilities have no such tendency at all.

The following schema (Fig. 2) is a modified version of that proposed by B. Schnieder to illustrate Bolzano’s theory of objects²³. I have adjusted it to Leibniz’s theory of *entia*.

22 A II 2: 81 (or GP II 49). Among other things, Leibniz remembers that the notion of a (possible) individual involves in itself that of its (possible) causes (cf. Chapter 6 above). The inclusion of the causal history into the complete notion is fundamental if the latter has to work as a genuine principle of individuation, i.e., the idea of a fully determinate and unique causal chain which connects all the stages of that individual’s life; cf. A II 2: 73–74 (or GP II 51). This idea can be traced, moreover, back to the Paris notes, especially to 1676’s *Meditatio de Principio Individui*, A VI 3: 490–491.

23 Cf. Schnieder (2007: 540). The proposed distinction between merely possible and abstract entities has been associated with that proposed by Linksy–Zalta and Williamson, between contingently and necessarily abstract objects. The main difference, however, is that for these modern authors everything exists necessarily, and, thus, statements concerning contingent existent

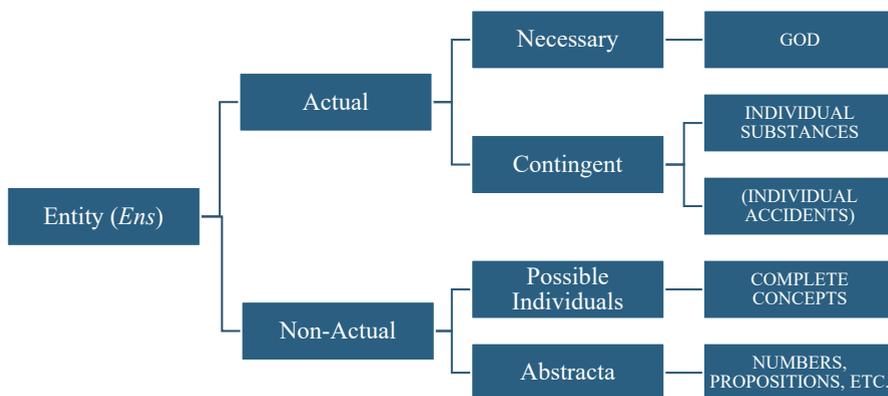


Fig. 2: Leibniz's division of beings (*entia*)

Most of the time, Leibniz speaks of «abstract and incomplete notions» as if they were one and the same thing. The idea seems to be that of a perfect correspondence between abstract and incomplete notions on one hand, and concrete and complete notions on the other.

In the scheme above, notice that all actual entities can be ascribed to the field of the concrete (the case of individual accidents is a special one, but it can be left aside here). In the field of what is non-actual, only ideal entities like numbers, propositions, and specific essences can be said to be *abstract* in a proper sense, whereas possible individuals seem to be part of the domain of the concrete. Possible individuals *qua* individual essences, however, seem to be abstract entities as well.

In the contemporary debate, whoever rejects modal realism and accepts a form of commitment to possible worlds, usually maintains that possible worlds are abstract entities. Of course, one should avoid the confusion that can be caused by imposing contemporary terminology on Leibniz's own way of distinguishing concrete and abstract entities. In contemporary modal metaphysics, for instance, numbers are abstract entities but are said to be actual, since they belong to the domain of the actual world (for they belong to the domain of every possible world). In the Leibnizian scheme I sketched above, however, numbers are abstract entities and *therefore* – since they are causally inert, having

things must be rephrased as statements concerning the fact that certain existing objects are contingently non-concrete (whereas other objects, like numbers, are necessarily abstracts). An important feature of Linsky and Zalta's approach is that they manage to distinguish between the (modal) contraposition “necessary”/“contingent” and the (ontological) one “essential”/“accidental”, so that, in their language, there are objects which are essentially but only contingently concrete (in the language employed above: possible individuals are essentially concrete but only contingently non-actual): see Linsky–Zalta (1996); cf. also Zalta (2000).

no spatiotemporal location, and so on – they cannot be actual (they are neither actual individuals nor possibly existing ones). Once again, modal distinctions and ontological distinctions are not easy to reconcile with each other.

One can say that concepts and propositions are to be counted among abstract entities. In distinguishing above between contingently and necessarily non-actual entities, I myself, indeed, have also listed “ideas” among the latter. Now, since possible individuals are to be properly regarded as complete concepts, which, in turn, are nothing but ideas in the mind of God, one should conclude that they are abstract entities.

In this sense, the distinction between the possible and the actual is easy to grasp: the possible Peter is not, properly speaking, an individual such and such (he does not deny Christ, etc.); it is only an idea (abstract entity) which represents or stands for an individual such and such (which would have denied Christ, etc., had God actualized that world). As Leibniz says in his remarks on Twisse which I quoted in the previous chapter, things, in the divine understanding, are contained *repraesentative* (Grua 355)²⁴.

When coming to complete concepts, Leibniz meanwhile seems, however, to be inclined to weaken the distinction between concepts and objects, for a complete concept is the perfect copy of the corresponding individual. In this sense, as far as I know, there are no passages in which Leibniz explicitly says that complete concepts are abstract entities.

The only relevant exception is represented by a passage, contained in a table of definitions, where Leibniz draws a somewhat different distinction, separating the opposition between the complete and the incomplete on the one hand, and that between the concrete and the abstract on the other:

Substance is a concrete complete, like a certain man, for instance Caesar.

Accident is an incomplete abstract.

A complete abstract is the very same essence of a substance, for instance Lentuleity; a concrete incomplete is a certain mathematical being which we conceive of as it were a substance, like space and time. (ca. 1680–85, A VI: 400)²⁵

24 Cf. Anfray (2016: 552). This idea of “representation” is what the modal realist finds impossible to understand; cf. Lewis (1986: 136ff).

25 This passage has been extensively discussed by Rauzy (2001: 245ff), and Di Bella (2005a: 183–184). Here, and in what follows, I will refer to what Leibniz calls a “concrete entity”, and not a “concrete term”, for a concrete term (like “human being”) can work as a logical subject but still refer to an incomplete entity. See for instance LH IV, 7C, Bl. 76r: «Being is either concrete, i.e., substantial, as “God”, “man”, “plant”, “machine”, “poet”; or abstract, as “reason”, “heat”. From the concrete a predicate cannot be constituted, as “hot” can be constituted from heat, so that “heat” would mean “to be hot”. And it is not the case that, when we say that “man” is “to be human”, we discover reasons in a thing considered in itself. “Humanity” is “to be human” – must, then, the subject of humanity be something different? If it is, then we could speak of subjecthood in its case in turn. Therefore, it is better to set abstract entities entirely aside, since they cannot be sustained against these difficulties (*Ens est*

The characterization of substance as a concrete-and-complete entity makes clear that Leibniz has in mind primary substances of the Aristotelian tradition: *this* man, like Caesar. An accident, by contrast, is characterized as an incomplete-and-abstract thing, i.e., something which is abstracted from the concrete substance with its own individual accidents (therefore, it is both abstract and incomplete). The notion of a “concrete incomplete” has already been envisaged in other passages where Leibniz repeated that certain *res mathematicae* can be conceived by us *ad instar substantiarum* (even though, properly speaking, space and time are not complete things; cf. the *concretum mathematicum* discussed in C 438).

The most puzzling element of this table of definitions, however, is the idea of a “complete abstract”, which, Leibniz says, is *ipsa Essentia Substantiae*, i.e., an individual essence, the abstraction which corresponds to an individual thing, like *Lentuleitas* (a term already used by Hobbes). What is problematic here is that such a characterization of an individual essence as something abstract-and-complete does not square with Leibniz’s usual characterization of the abstract/concrete distinction.

Leibniz himself should have been aware of this, for he adds a marginal note where he substantially repeats his usual distinction, i.e., that two abstract terms can be distinguished, even though this distinction does not immediately amount to a distinction between two things (because there can be two different terms, like “dry” and “warm”, which can be attributed to the very same thing)²⁶. This second characterization does not capture the sense in which possible worlds could be said to be abstract entities; for possible worlds are composed by things like *Lentuleitas* and *Petrinitas*, i.e., by concepts which stand for individual essences.

The only explanation I have in mind is that, once again, “abstraction” and “abstract” are ambiguously employed by Leibniz. In particular, the notion of abstraction required here (in the case of “Lentuleity”) is that of “abstraction from existence”, which characterizes the Scholastic notion of *abstractio praecisiva*, as a sort of abstraction from both the actual existence and the non-existence of a thing. At the root of this idea, there is a distinction, originally proposed by Scotus, between *abstractive* and *intuitive* knowledge, where both “abstraction” and “intuition” have to do with existence only: intuitive cognition is the knowledge of an existent thing insofar as it exists (and, thus, it is immediate knowledge), whereas abstractive cognition is the kind of knowledge of the nature (or

vel concretum seu substantiale, ut DEUS, homo, planta, machina, poeta, vel abstractum, ut ratio, calor. A concreto non potest constitui praedicatum ut a calore calidus ita ut calor sit tò esse calidum. Neque cum dici potest hominem esse tò esse homineum, in re sigillatim spectata reperiamus rationes. Humanitas est tò esse hominem, an ergo subjectum humanitatis est aliquid diversum? Quod si est id rursus de eo dicere poterimus subjectitatem; praestat ergo entia abstracta plane sequestrare, cum sustineri contra difficultates non possunt)».

26 Cf. also Mugnai (2000); Di Bella (2004).

quiddity) of something which makes abstraction from the existence (or non-existence) of the thing²⁷.

In late Scholasticism, the distinction between intuitive and abstractive knowledge also corresponds to that between knowledge of vision (i.e., of the actual world) and knowledge of simple understanding (i.e., of the possible), for knowledge of vision is intuitive (in the sense established above) and knowledge of simple understanding is abstractive, i.e., makes abstraction from existence (but not from singularity)²⁸. Notice, also, that intuitive knowledge, which is defined as *notitia rei presentis ut praesens est*, is not necessarily characterized as a kind of knowledge which depends on the presence of the object, «for the knowledge (*notitia*) by means of which God intuits both himself and creatures, is intuitive but is said to depend, nevertheless, neither on God himself nor on the creatures, and is caused by none of them»²⁹.

Reference to alternative possible worlds, moreover, generally occurred in contexts related to the debate concerning the so-called “middle knowledge”, i.e., God’s knowledge of conditioned futurities (which are a particular kind of counterfactual conditionals). As has been shown, possible worlds are conceived in the debates on middle knowledge as “abstract worlds”, where the term “abstraction”, however, means abstraction from the disjunction between existence and non-existence; in this sense, the term “world” no longer means the world in a concrete sense, but the different ways in which our world could be.

It is interesting to quote, for instance, a passage from the Jesuit Pedro Hurtado de Mendoza (1578-1641), where he writes that, before decreeing to create this world, God not only knew his own omnipotence but also something else, i.e., possible worlds. But those things which he knew before creating the

27 See Boler (1982). Cf. also Bérubé (1964).

28 See F. Suárez, *De Divina Substantia*, III, chapter IV, 2–3: the first division of divine knowledge is that between knowledge of simple understanding and knowledge of vision; the second is that between abstractive and intuitive knowledge. Knowledge of vision, insofar as the existent has its own object, must be intuitive; whereas knowledge of the possible is abstractive, «since it makes abstraction from the actual existence of its object». Abstractive knowledge has only creatures as objects, since only created things do not involve existence in themselves, «and, therefore, they can be known according to their essences, i.e., *quidditative*, even though they are not regarded as existents» (ed. Vivès I, 207 b).

29 *Commentarii Collegii Conimbricensis S. J. In tres libros de Anima Aristotelis Stagiritae* (Coimbra: A Mairz, 1598), II, 6, 3, 1, quoted by Gilson (1979: 53, N. 87). This point is relevant to Leibniz’s explication of God’s vision of contingent truths; cf. *De Libertate, Contingentia, et Serie Causarum*. «God’s vision, however, should hardly be thought of as a kind of experiential knowledge (as if he sees something in things distinct from himself), but as *a priori* knowledge, knowledge derived from the reasons for truths, insofar as he sees things within himself (*ex se ipso*), possibles through a consideration of his own nature, and existing things through the additional consideration of his free will and his decrees [...]» (A VI 4: 1658/AG 97). Di Bella (2005a: 357), speaks of a paradoxical case of knowledge by acquaintance which precedes, however, its object and does not follow its object.

world were not something existing prior to him (nor were they something in-existent either); rather, he «knew something distinct from himself, which makes abstraction from both actual and non-actual existence (*praecisum ab existentia et non existentia exercita*)». They were something possible since they entertained the state of what is intrinsically apt to exist (the concept of *aptitudo* to existence is employed, once again, to distinguish what is really possible from the being of reason)³⁰.

10.6. Contingency, Individuality, and Possible Existence

According to the traditional theological account (which Leibniz seems to follow quite faithfully), the distinction between knowledge of the possible and knowledge of the actual corresponds to that between God's pre-volitional knowledge and his post-volitional knowledge, where reference to divine will has to be understood in terms of the causal efficacy of the latter. What actually exists, indeed, is what the Scholastic tradition called *esse rei extra causas*, where to exist "out of the causes" nevertheless requires the intervention of divine will.

This explains why it is the case, according to the traditional bipartition, that while the object of knowledge of vision, i.e., what is actual, is contingent, the object of knowledge of simple understanding, i.e., what is possible, is necessary (one can understand it as the idea that what is possible is necessarily so, whereas what is actual, being an object of free creation, is contingent).

The domain of conditioned existences (e.g., what would have happened to Peter had God created another world), was regarded by Jesuit theologians as the object of a third and distinct kind of knowledge (middle knowledge), exactly because it has to be conceived of both as pre-volitional (prior to God's act of creation) and as contingent. By rejecting the existence of a distinct kind of knowledge, intermediate between that of the possible and that of the actual, however, Leibniz is at pains to make sense of the situation in which there is something which is the *contingent* object of a *necessary* knowledge; this is one of the reasons why Leibniz sometimes prefers to reduce middle knowledge to knowledge of vision³¹.

30 Cf. Hurtado de Mendoza, *Disputationes de Deo Homine* (Antwerp 1634), disp. 29, section 97, 596 r-596 v. I quote the text from Schmutz (2003, vol. II: 649–650); cf. also Caruso (1979: 73–74).

31 Cf. A VI 4: 1660–1661/AG 99, and Grua 349. The distinction seems to be based on the mismatch between ontology and modality to which I have already drawn attention above. When the distinction at stake is one between necessary and contingent propositions, i.e., between those propositions which are grounded in general essences and propositions which are grounded in singular, individual essences, middle knowledge (being knowledge of contingent propositions about merely possible individuals) must be paired with knowledge of vision (for the latter is contingent). When the distinction, instead, is one between the possible and the actual, middle knowledge must be paired with knowledge of simple understanding, for the latter is knowledge of what is merely possible.

That conditioned existences (i.e., possible individuals) correspond to what Leibniz sometimes calls “contingent possibles” clearly emerges from those passages in which he discusses the topic of *scientia Dei*. In a text related to the discussion with Bayle, for instance, he noted that knowledge of the possibles is called knowledge of simple understanding, and that it embraces both (a) possibles and their mutual connections (therefore, all necessary truths), and (b) «contingent possibles and their mutual connections, and, therefore, also conditional futures, i.e., what would follow from a given contingent thing, even though this kind of connection is also contingent, and not necessary», and that is why what is commonly called “middle knowledge” has to be recollected under knowledge of simple understanding³².

As Leibniz makes clear, the connections between possibles which constitute a possible world therefore consist of both “necessary” connections between essences of kind (a) and of “contingent” connections between individual essences of kind (b), among which one should include relations of connection between possibly existing individuals (the order which constitutes the very same possible world as a *series rerum*), and, therefore, also relations of cause and effect (taken as possible).

In a sense, Leibniz himself seems to recognize that knowledge of what is possible can be taken in a large as well as in a strict sense, depending on whether one wants to consider contingent possibilities (those which concern possibly existent individuals) as part of the “realm of the possibles”, and, thus, ascribe to them the domain of the understanding; or to emphasize, rather, the distinction between necessary possibilities (i.e., general essences and eternal truths in a proper sense) and truths which concern possible individuals, which might be equally ascribed to the field of conditional existence (as the proper object of the middle knowledge).

As usual, Leibniz seems to take it for granted that these two accounts are mutually compatible. According to the former, however, contingent possibles are understood as being on a par with general essences (necessary truths), since they both inhabit the domain of “eternal truths”, and are contrasted with the domain of the actual. In this case, however, it is difficult to avoid the conclusion that necessity corresponding to the pre-volitional character of God’s simple understanding be transferred to the truths concerning possible individuals as well. Accordingly, the conclusion would follow that truths about merely possible non-actualized things are necessary, as many interpreters – from Russell onwards – have constantly repeated. This seems, moreover, to be consistent with

32 GP III 30; cf. also the similar presentation in *Causa Dei*, §§14–15: «Concernig the possibles, there is what is called knowledge of simple intelligence, which deals both with things and with their connections – and both are nonetheless necessary rather than contingent. [...] Contingent possibles can be considered either as taken separately, or as coordinated into infinitely many complete possible worlds [...]» (GP VI 440).

the Russellian view that existence is the only contingent feature an individual (or a world) can have.

The other account, by contrast, makes room for contingent predicates at the level of what is purely possible (i.e., of what is true of a possible individual). The drawback, however, is that this seems to be incompatible with the univocal reading of existence as actuality, which is the core of what I have dubbed “Leibnizian actualism”.

This tension, however, can be somewhat attenuated if we keep in mind what Leibniz says about possible existence (as interpreted above). First of all, even in those passages in which Leibniz puts forward the strategy based on the reduction both of possible individuals and possibilities to eternal truths, he does so not to blur the distinction between necessary and contingent truths, but, on the contrary, to strengthen this distinction. One of the main reasons why Leibniz insists that the actual decree changes nothing in the constitution of things is just because this means that God’s will cannot produce any modification in it. This also means, however, that what is necessary at the level of mere possibilities remains necessary, and that what is contingent at the level of mere possibilities remains contingent (cf. GP VI 131/H 154–155).

Secondly, even when taking into account the point of view defended in the *Causa Dei*³³ and in all the other texts in which the existence of a class of contingent possibles is emphasized, one can still conclude that contingency is primarily something which has to do with the idea of existence, since the fundamental notion at stake here is that of a “possible creation”, which involves in itself the idea of the possibility of existence (which is the same thing that, in the text above, is called “conditioned existence”).

Leibniz regards “knowledge of the possible” as involving both possibles in themselves and their connections. Connections are said to be what should be followed when something else is posited into actuality: another reference to the conditional account of propositions; but connections can either be necessary or contingent. Necessary connections, such as those exemplified by the definitions of geometrical notions, are exactly those which imply no reference to an individual,

33 «Knowledge that is commonly called “intermediate” has to be collected under knowledge of simple understanding [...]. However, if someone prefers to posit a certain intermediate knowledge between that of pure understanding and that of vision, he could do that; he could also conceive of that in a way different from the way in which it is commonly understood [by the Schoolmen], i.e., not as concerning only conditioned futures, but the entire field of contingent possibles in general. In this way, knowledge of simple understanding will be assumed in a restricted sense, i.e., as dealing with truths which are both necessary and possible, whereas middle knowledge will deal with truths which are both contingent and possible, and, finally, knowledge of vision of truths which are both contingent and actual. And the intermediate one will have in common with the first the fact of dealing with possible truths, and with the second the fact of dealing with contingent ones» (*Causa Dei*, §17, GP VI 441). The same view is presented in the *Meditationes Pacatae*, A IV 9: 608 (DPG 75–76).

i.e., to something which either actually exists or can be conceived of as existing (as something with an exigency toward existence, as Leibniz would say).

The very same notion of an individual, indeed, presupposes the notion of existence, since what distinguishes the former from the notion of an abstract notion (an essence) is exactly that relation-with-a-subject (*subjectio*)³⁴ which brings within itself all the system of relations of connection which hold among the members of each possible world. (All these relations are contingent in the sense of being not metaphysically but just hypothetically necessary.)

A problem with this solution, which ultimately connects contingency with existence only through individuality (the level of individuals, possible or actual), is that it seems to make contingent a class of truths that one would normally like to take as necessary. According to what I have said so far, the only absolutely (or metaphysically) necessary propositions would be those of the form “A human being is rational” (or “The circle is the most capacious isoperimetric notion”); but propositions like “Peter is rational” or “Peter is a man” would turn out to be contingent. This criticism has originally been moved against Russell’s interpretation of contingency in terms of existence³⁵.

Such an objection applies to my interpretation as well, since it seems that one must conclude that “Peter is a rational animal” is as contingent as “Peter denied Christ”, but this seems to be at odds with the idea that Peter cannot exist without being a rational animal (or, alternatively, Peter cannot be Peter without being a rational animal), whereas Peter could exist without denying Christ. A first way to answer this objection is to show that Leibniz makes room for a distinction between temporary and permanent properties even within the framework of what has been called his “superessentialist” theory³⁶.

As Leibniz himself remarks, after all, one should distinguish between those properties which belong to the essence of a thing and those which belong to its notion (i.e., to its complete concept): «Those properties which belong to a thing necessarily and perpetually, belong to the essence of it; those, by contrast, which belong to it contingently or accidentally, or those which God sees when

34 Cf. *De iis quae per se concipiuntur*, September 1677, A VI 4: 26. Cf. also *Monadology*, §47: «God has *power*, which is the source of everything, *knowledge*, which contains the diversity of ideas, and finally *will*, which brings about changes or products in accordance with the principle of the best [...]. And these correspond to what, in created monads, is the *subject or the basis*, the perceptive faculty and the appetitive faculty» (GP VI 615/AG 219, last italics mine). As I have already said above, the notion of an ontological subject seems to be irreducible to that of a complete concept or, also, to that of a primitive active force: «Nevertheless it is true that the substance *in concreto* is something other than force, because it is the subject taken with this force» (A II 2: 487, quoted in Sleigh 1990, 97–98); see also GP III 656–657. Cf. Pelletier (2023). On the distinction between substance-as-an-essence (primary entelechy, etc.) and substance-as-a-subject, cf. also Arthur (2018b: 63–64).

35 See Maher (1980: 238) and also Vailati (1986: 200).

36 See Mates (1986: 113 fn29).

he has perfectly understood the thing itself, belong to the notion of a singular thing» (A VI 4: 1593).

As Leibniz writes, moreover, in a paper on existential propositions: «In true existing individuals, all propositions, even the essential ones, are at the same time existential (*In veris individuis existentibus omnes propositiones etiam essentialia sunt simul existentiales*)» (A VI 4: 1633). It is thus plausible that Leibniz would have subscribed to the following view: even though it is true that individuals have essential properties (in the temporal sense clarified above), this does not mean that propositions about individuals (be they actual or not) can also be assumed to be necessary³⁷. Once again, this seems to fit well with the perspective, adopted by Suárez and others, according to which “All human beings are animals” has to be interpreted as: “If God does create something that is a human being, he cannot but create also an animal”, where the connection between “human being” and “animal” is an absolutely necessary one, whereas the contingent (i.e. that which is connected with the idea of creation) comes into play in relation to the possible existence of human individuals.

I suggest, therefore, that the univocal reading of existence can be saved by interpreting Leibniz’s talking of middle knowledge, conditional existence, possible individuals etc., in counterfactual terms. This is what Leibniz himself seems to suggest in the following passage from his remarks on Burnet:

Foreknowledge, preceding the decree concerning the existence of a foreseen thing and independent of the decree, is not pure, nor does it represent anything future absolutely, but arises from the mere consideration of possibles; and it does not involve actual existence, but hypothetical existence: namely, that God sees what, given a thing and a part of a given series, holds in the whole; and given the state of one in a temporal series, what will occur in the rest of time³⁸.

The counterfactual reading has already been presupposed in the account of creation provided in section 14 of the *Discourse*, where Leibniz says that the «result of each view of the universe, as seen from a certain position [the “point of view”³⁹] is a substance which expresses the universe in conformity with this

³⁷ See Rodríguez Pereyra–Lodge (2011: 231).

³⁸ «Praesentia decretum de rei praesentia existentia praecedens et a decreto independens non est pura aut aliquid futurum absolute repraesentans, sed orta ex nuda consideratione possibilium; et existentiam non actualem involvit, sed hypotheticam: ut scilicet videat Deus, quid data re, et datae seriei parte admissa, in toto; et unius in serie temporis statu admissa, in reliquo tempore sit futurum» (A IV 9: 622–623/DPG 89).

³⁹ Cf. Leibniz’s reply to Bayle, 1702: «For each thing or part of the universe must point to all the rest, in such a way that the soul, as concerns the variety of its modifications, must be compared, not with a material atom, but with the universe which it represents according to its point of view [...]» (GP IV 562/L579). Cf. the correspondence with Arnauld, especially A II 2: 18–19; A II 2: 80/LA 64; A II 2: 188/LA 123. See also *New System* (1695), GP IV 484/L 457–458,

view, *should God see fit to render his thought actual and to produce this substance*» (A VI 4: 1550/AG 46–47, italics mine).

The passage quoted above adds to this picture a clear distinction between actual existence and conditioned existence, where the latter represents no more than God’s act of seeing what happens in a possible world (taken *in toto*) if a given individual is assumed as a part of it, and what would happen if that very same individual were to be actualized, i.e., admitted into “the series of time”. Notice also that these counterfactuals (concerning God’s alternative creations) are to be taken as primitive ones, i.e., they cannot be analysed in terms of the possible-worlds analysis of counterfactuals sketched by Leibniz in §42 of the *Theodicy* (as well as in the fable at the end of the same book)⁴⁰.

Alternatively, if one wants to stick to Leibniz’s way of employing the distinction between essential and existential properties as both relative to each possible world, then one can relativize the notion of existence, indexing it to what exists in a determinate world (as “existence at *W*”), and use “actuality” for referring to what exists only in the most perfect possible world. Such a distinction between existence and actuality is diametrically opposed to that suggested by David Lewis, since actuality is now taken as an absolute property, and existence as merely a relative one (“existing-at-a-merely-possible-world” amounts to the kind of *diminished being* of what is contained only in God’s understanding). In other words, what is actual exists both in God’s understanding (since what is actual is also possible) and in reality (*in rerum natura, esse extra causas*), whereas what exists in a (merely) possible world exists only in the understanding.

10.7. A Final Overview

In what follows, I will summarize what I have said so far, by presenting a table which illustrates the mutual connections between three different levels of Leibniz’s discourse: the theological, the ontological, and the modal levels. The following table (Table 1) is modelled on the articulation of the different “regions” of Leibniz’s ontology originally sketched by Martial Gueroult in a seminal paper⁴¹, with some modifications as far as the connections between theological and properly philosophical aspects are concerned.

where Leibniz specifies that the point of view of a substance is in the “organized mass”, i.e., its organic body; to De Volder, December 1702 (or June 1703), A II 4: 134/LDV 263.

40 They are primitive because they are counterfactuals concerning “what God would have done, if...”, and God is one and the same for all possible worlds (i.e., there are no counterparts of God); cf. Wilson (1979) and Griffin (1999). On Leibniz’s account of counterfactuals, see also Mondadori (1983).

41 Cf. Gueroult (1946: 244–249), where Gueroult sketches a whole hierarchy of ontological regions. In his original account, these are 1) the region of the pure essences (in their absolute intrinsic and non-relational aspect): the absolute attributes of God or *prima possibilita*; 2) the region of the understanding, characterized by the appearance of relational considerations. This region has to be internally distinguished into several different levels: 2.1) a system of

Table 1: Visualising Leibniz's theological, ontological, and modal distinctions

| Divine Essence and Faculties | Theology (1): Power | Theology (2): Knowledge | Ontology | Modality |
|-------------------------------------|--|--|--|--|
| <i>Divine Essence</i> | | | <i>Divine Attributes</i> (Primitive Possibles) | |
| <i>Understanding</i> | <i>Absolute Power</i> | <i>Knowledge of Simple Understanding</i> | <i>Possibility</i> (Eternal Truths, General Essences) | Absolute Necessity |
| <i>(Wisdom)</i> | <i>Ordnained Power</i> (Possible Decrees) | <i>(Middle Knowledge)</i> | <i>Compossibility</i> (Conditioned Existences, Possible Worlds, Possible Individuals) | Contingency = Hypothetical Necessity |
| <i>Will</i> | <i>Ordnained Power</i> (Actual Decree) | <i>Knowledge of Vision</i> | <i>Actual Existence</i> (Actual Individuals) | Contingency = Moral Necessity (Principle of the Best) |

The table should be tripartite, but I have added the level of divine essence, since Leibniz (in his notes on Twisse) distinguishes between divine essence as such and divine understanding, the first containing everything in an eminent way, the second only in a representative way. The level of divine essence as such is also required to distinguish between divine attributes (sometimes called “primitive possibles”) and the level of possibilities (both general essences and individual essences).

One could object, moreover, that the table should contain only two levels, that of divine understanding and that of divine will, since divine wisdom (the level of possible worlds) might be reduced either to divine understanding or to

relations of purely logical natures, without any reference to existence at all (a metaphysical absolute space of possibilities); 2.2) the principle of identity, non-contradiction, and of continuity (to which the region of specific essences is attached). These first two regions correspond to divine understanding without any intervention of divine will, whereas the following regions imply a reference to divine will and, from the ontological point of view, to existence (both possible and actual): 3) the region of compossibility and impossibility, i.e., possible worlds; 4) the region of actual existence (the best possible world). In my table above, (1) corresponds to the level of divine essence as such, (2) to that of divine understanding (in a narrow sense); (3) to that of divine wisdom; (4) to that of divine will (in a narrow sense). Alternatively, one can read (3) as belonging to the domain of divine understanding in a broad sense, and/or that of merely possible divine decrees (i.e., middle knowledge, as knowledge of possible individuals, oscillating between simple understanding and vision); therefore, (4) has to be read as belonging to divine will in the sense of the actual divine decree.

divine will⁴². The same ambiguity also holds in the case of middle knowledge, about which Leibniz is uncertain whether it should be reduced to knowledge of simple understanding or that of knowledge of vision. From the ontological point of view, however, this intermediate level helps to distinguish between the level of abstract essences and that of possible individuals, i.e., between the level of bare possibility and that of compossibility (or, again, the level of necessary possibles and that of merely contingent possibles).

Another thing to observe is that, from the theological point of view, Leibniz seems to reduce divine wisdom to that obtaining between understanding or will (and middle knowledge to that obtaining between knowledge of simple understanding or knowledge of vision). This mirrors the bipartition between God's absolute power and his ordained power (for no tripartition is possible in the field of God's power), even though the objection could be raised that one should distinguish, within ordained power, between the level of merely possible decrees and that of the actual decree as well.

42 See the recent essay by Jorati (2016). The main claim of this essay is to show that wisdom constitutes for Leibniz a sort of intermediate faculty between divine understanding and will, and that, as such, it is the source of impossibility. What I find particularly interesting is that Jorati shows that Leibniz's ideas on wisdom are not very clear, for sometimes he seems to consider it as part of God's understanding, and at other times he associates it with divine will (see the texts that Jorati quotes at 186–192). A similar indecision may be observed in Leibniz's attempt to reduce "middle knowledge" to either God's knowledge of simple understanding or his knowledge of vision.

Conclusion. Leibniz's Metaphysics of Existence: An Outline

The main aspects of the notion of existence according to Leibniz can be summarized at this point; the aim here is to account for them through a comparison with a quite standard account, i.e., what has been called an “elementary concept of existence”¹. The standard concept of existence can be summarized as follows:

- 1) *Either something exists or it does not.* The principle of bivalence holds for all existential statements, they are all either true or false. The question of whether something exists or not is one which presupposes a yes/no answer;
- 2) *There are no degrees of existence.* Nothing can have more or less existence than anything else;
- 3) *There are no kinds of existence.* To speak of “kinds of existence” is to make a conceptual mistake: there are different kinds of existing things, but no different kinds of existence;
- 4) *Existence is not a relative concept.* To exist is to exist absolutely;
- 5) *Existence is not a property.* Attributing existence to something is completely different from attributing a property to something. That everything exists is a necessary truth;
- 6) *We cannot classify objects into existent and non-existent.*

This is not a neutral account of existence, because, for instance, point (5) would be rejected by all Neo-Meinongian philosophers, who maintain that existence is a property of individuals and, therefore, that it is not necessary that everything exists². This account is also a non-reductive one, because many of these points are not independent from the others. For instance, points (1) – (4) form a coherent set of ideas concerning the absolute character of existence.

For Leibniz, he would accept points (1) – (4). Point (1) has been discussed in the light of Leibniz's argument for rejecting a plurality of actual worlds. Contrary to the notions of reality or essence, for which Leibniz admits degrees, he seems to admit no degree of existence. Point (3) is more problematic, because there are some early texts (which I have discussed in Chapter 5 above), where Leibniz explicitly endorses the view that “existence” is said equivocally of souls and bodies, where bodies are clearly constructed as phenomena (see especially A VI 3: 512). This claim, however, seems to be limited to Leibniz's phenomenological account of existence, and, as far as his ontology is concerned,

1 Cf. Gibson (1998: 4–8), from which I have taken the following six points.

2 For an introduction to Meinongianism, see Berto (2012b).

he seems more inclined to admit that there are different kinds of things rather than different kinds of existence.

Things are completely different when we focus on points (5) and (6). Concerning point (5), the idea is that existence is not a property of individuals, from which, as pointed out by Quine, the consequence follows that “everything exists”³. This is also the most controversial aspect of the standard account of existence from the intuitive point of view, especially as far as negative existential statements are concerned. With Leibniz, however, the main problem is that his mature philosophy rejects the claim that everything exists, as well as the view that “everything exists” is necessarily true. At the same time, however, Leibniz would plainly subscribe to the view stated in (6), i.e., that we cannot separate, so to say, existent objects from non-existent ones (as we can separate red objects from those which are not red). This seems to be quite puzzling for (5) and (6) seems to be two mutually supporting claims.

I would say that Leibniz’s apparently puzzling position is the result of what I call his combination of metaphysical actualism and logical possibilism. The requisite that “everything exists”, indeed, originates from a logical worry, one which has been plainly expressed by Frege in the following terms: «The rules of logic always presuppose that the words we use are not empty, that our sentences express judgments, that one is not playing a mere game with words» (Frege 1979: 60). In other words, as Frege points out, a proposition like “Leo Sachse is a man” is the expression of a thought only if “Leo Sachse” designates something, and designation requires the truth of “Leo Sachse exists”, or, in more general terms, that the domain of quantification is not empty⁴.

3 The idea that everything exists, and it is necessarily so, can be traced back to Frege’s views in his dialogue with Punjer, where he clearly states the parallel between existence and self-identity; cf. Frege (1979: 62): «I shall use the fact that instead of “exists” one can also say “is identical with itself” to show that the content of what is predicated does not lie in the word “exists”. “There are men” means the same as “Some men are identical with themselves” or “Something identical with itself is a man”. Neither in “*A* is identical with itself” nor in “*A* exists” does one learn anything new about *A*. Neither statement can be denied».

4 Frege’s position makes sense if one remembers that classical logic has been invented in order to solve problems connected with the foundations of mathematics. When existence is restricted to mathematical existence, indeed, it is not bizarre to understand it as a logical property. The problem arises when the same account is extended to cover the notion of existence *tout court*, as it happens with Quine’s theory of ontological commitment. The point has been originally stressed by Russell in his reply to Hugh Mc Call (Russell 1905a). See especially Russell (1905a: 398), where he shows to consider the philosophical meaning of existence as completely different from that of logical existence. Later on, however, Russell will change his mind, as it appears in his 1918 lectures, where he explicitly states: «there is not an idea [of existence] that will apply to individuals. As regards the actual things there are in the world, there is nothing at all you can say about them that in any way corresponds to this notion of existence. It is a sheer mistake to say that there is anything analogous to existence that you can say about them» (Russell 2009: 77). For Russell, too, the philosophical sense of existence would eventually be wholly captured by the logical one.

A similar concern can be found in Leibniz's criticism of Descartes' version of the ontological argument, where the point is that one must prove that the term (the idea of) "the most perfect being" is not a "mere game with words"; the difference, however, is that, in order to guarantee a sort of reference to a term, it is not actual existence that is required (for, otherwise, the ontological argument would be circular) but just its possibility (see Chapter 4 above). What is needed for the domain of quantification not to be empty, therefore, is not a domain of actual things, but only one of possible things (and, of course, the domain of actual things is only a subset of that of possible things). This is the basic semantic approach in Leibniz's essays on logical calculi, where "term" (*terminus*) is equated with "entity" (*ens*), and the latter is either taken to range over possible beings or, alternatively, can be restricted to actual beings only (with no modification for the calculus, apparently).

This immediately poses the problem, however, of the ontological status of possible beings: if they are things in a proper sense, then there is a sense in which one can distinguish between existing and non-existing objects. The mature Leibniz, however, avoids this realist solution by adopting a form of *conceptualism*, for his logic is a logic of concepts, where those possible beings over which "terms" or "entities" range are not objects but concepts. As he writes in one of his replies to Gabriel Wagner in 1698: «The connection among concepts arises from the connection among possible objects, i.e., ideas (*Connexio conceptuum oritur ex connectione objectorum possibilium, seu idearum*)» (A II 3: 687–688).

If we take a minimal notion of object (as a "bearer of properties", for instance), where the only constraint to be an object is that it does not involve contradictory predicates, then Leibnizian terms must, of course, be equated with objects. This is the point, however, where his logical possibilism is somewhat corrected by his metaphysical actualism (which goes hand in hand with a conceptualist account of *possibilia* as ideas in the mind of God). In other words, it seems to me that one should not be distracted by Leibniz's way of talking in his logical essays, where he seems to adopt a possibilist perspective⁵.

It must be emphasized, however, that the reliability of this possibilist reading has been questioned by the most recent reading of Leibniz's logical calculus as presented in the *Generales Inquisitiones*. It has been proposed, indeed, that Leibniz's reference to *ens* or *possibile* (taken as synonyms) in the *Generales*

5 This is the basic semantic approach in Leibniz's essays on logical calculi, where "term" is equated with "entity" (*ens*), which is taken to range over possible beings. From the ontological point of view, however, this seems to require an enriched ontology, i.e., one in which the domain of actual things does not coincide with everything there is, but only a proper part of it; in other words, it presupposes a distinction between being and existence. Interestingly, a similar approach can be found in the early Russell (before his discussion with Meinong); cf. *The Principles of Mathematics* (1903), especially §47 and §427 (Russell 1938: 43–44 and 449–450), where the distinction between being and existence is explicitly stated.

Inquisitiones must not be interpreted in a proper modal sense, but only in an assertoric way:

It should be acknowledged, of course, that there are certain *prima facie* considerations that seem to speak in favour of a modal interpretation of truth and falsehood in the *Generales Inquisitiones*. [...] [W]hile Leibniz makes use of modal notions at various points throughout the *Generales Inquisitiones*, his calculus is not a calculus for reasoning about such modal notions but only about assertoric truth and falsehood. In short, Leibniz's calculus is not a modal logic. (Malink–Vasudevan 2016: 719)⁶

This conclusion matches very well with the distinction between modal and ontological considerations that I have introduced in order to disentangle some of the ambiguities with which we are confronted in Leibniz's account of existence. Possible existence, indeed, makes sense from the ontological point of view, not from the modal one. When existence is understood modally, i.e., as “actuality”, there is nothing like a domain of purely possible objects.

The conclusion Leibniz reaches in the texts I have analysed in Chapters 7–10 above speak in favour of the view that everything existing must be actual, i.e., that there are no objects which are not actual. In this way, one obtains the idea of the actual world as the maximal set of things closed under relations of (spatiotemporal and causal) connection, which is just the counterpart, at the level of actuality, of the idea of a possible world as a maximal consistent set of complete individual concepts.

In Part One of this book, moreover, I have shown that the young Leibniz defended something similar both to points (5) and (6); in particular, and contrary to what will happen in his mature writings, he implicitly rejects the view that existence is a property of individuals. Both his reading of predication (where the “ontological subject” is presupposed by and extruded from the predicative structure) and his rejection of the ontological argument as a circular proof in 1671 support the idea that existence is not a property. This is also consistent with the fact that no metaphysical characterization of existence can be found in Leibniz's pre-Paris writings, whereas the preponderant view is that existence may be accounted for (though not explained away) in terms of distinct perceivability.

6 See Malink–Vasudevan (2016: 719), where they criticize the interpretation of Leibniz's logic as a system of strict implication. They acknowledge that Leibniz equates *true* with *possible* (the first is related to propositions, the second to terms), but conclude that: the fundamental laws of truth and falsity stated in the *Generales Inquisitiones* «indicate that, for Leibniz, truth and falsehood when applied to propositional terms [what Leibniz calls “logical abstracts”, which allow him to reduce propositions to terms] do not express possibility and impossibility but instead purely assertoric notions that impart no modal force to the propositions of the calculus». Note also that *possible* is used to describe a term involving neither *B* nor *non-B*, where no modal characterization seems to actually be at work.

As I have said above, such a position may be explained by the fact that the young Leibniz had not yet in mind something like a possible-worlds ontology. On the contrary, his mature conceptualism will be characterized by the claim that the domain of possible entities should be understood as a sort of intermediate domain of concepts (the *objective concepts* of the tradition) obtaining between the level of words or concepts in our minds, and the level of things. Once again, these concepts or ideas have an ontological status (*a reality*) not in themselves but only insofar as they are the objects of God's thought, and God is an actual entity. This is the way in which, from the metaphysical point of view, Leibniz reduces the possibilist discussion to an actualist discussion in terms of divine ideas⁷.

7 Such a move, however, can be criticized for two distinct reasons: first, it reduces discussions about propositions to discussions about ideas in the psychological sense, even if it is a sort of divine-mind psychologism (this is the criticism raised by full-fledged Platonists, like Bolzano); secondly, the reduction of the possibilist discussion to the actualist discussion necessarily requires the existence of God, i.e., metaphysics necessarily requires a theological background (this criticism could be shared by many metaphysicians amongst Leibniz's contemporaries).

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Oswaldo Ottaviani

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Leibniz on Existence offers a systematic reconstruction of Leibniz's evolving conception of existence, combining historical and analytical approaches. It argues that Leibniz conceives existence on three interconnected levels—phenomenological (real vs. imaginary), ontological (concrete vs. abstract), and modal (actual vs. possible)—and that the tensions among these levels are structural to his metaphysics. Tracing his thought from its nominalist beginnings to the mature theory of possible worlds, the book shows how Leibniz's reflections on existence illuminate the interplay between rational theology, metaphysics, and the relation between the possible and the actual.

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