

INTRODUCTION

1. AIM AND STRUCTURE

My aim is to offer an account of the foundations of Leibniz's conception concerning one of the central topics of his philosophy, namely substance. Benson Mates once wrote what has become a notorious expression of what many commentators have felt:

“I wish I could offer a satisfactory answer to this question [of what Leibniz could possibly have meant by the term ‘substance’], [...] but I cannot. [...] Only a few relatively determinate features of the matter can be discerned through the murky metaphysical mist.” (Mat 189)

The present study might well be characterized as an attempt at making such a bleak assessment antiquated. I argue that the foundations of Leibniz's notion of substance can be brought to light in a fairly clear and distinct way, and that Leibniz's treatment of substantiality is governed by clear and carefully developed standards of significance.¹

First I present an account of the relevant parts of Leibniz's general metaphysical project from which – as I will argue – his conception of substantiality² stems. This account then allows a reconstruction of what the mature Leibniz probably regarded as the basic definition of substance, and of his reasons for the solution. As an immediate outcome, the key moments of Leibniz's conception of substantiality should be ready to hand for an assessment of certain frequently discussed parts of Leibniz's philosophy. I lay throughout a strong emphasis on tracing Leibniz back to his arguably most fundamental considerations relevant to the doctrines in question, and on a detailed examination of how these doctrines stem from those foundations.

The study consists of two parts. The concern of *part I* is to account for Leibniz's general conception of the science of metaphysics in so far as it sheds light on his notion of substance, and to establish a conceptual framework for dealing with the most general parts of Leibniz's conception of substantiality. In chapter 1, I offer an account of the proper object of metaphysics according to Leibniz and I examine

- 1 I am nowhere near the first to take such a stand. Donald Rutherford, in particular, moves vigorously in this direction in his (1995). I draw heavily on his achievements at several crucial points of my argument, and I am happy to acknowledge how much I owe to him.
- 2 I will use the term ‘substance’ to refer to entities which satisfy certain criteria whose identification will concern us in the bulk of the present study, and the term ‘substantiality’ to refer to the complete set of features by virtue of which it is appropriate for a given entity to be characterized as a substance. As will become clear in the course of the study, the expressions ‘the definition of substance’ and ‘the notion of substance’ in fact refer to the complete set of the concepts of those very same features.

the tacit or semi-tacit assumptions arguably inherent in the whole conception. I also investigate Leibniz's views on the method of the science of metaphysics and show how Leibniz's theory of truth is related to it. Chapter 2 starts with the identification of the principal methodological tension implicit in Leibniz's metaphysical conception. Then I utilise this tension to vindicate what I propose to be Leibniz's chief strategy in elaborating the notion of substance and I sketch the corresponding interpretative framework. In chapter 3, I identify a set of candidates for being the basic defining features of substance and I arrive at what, arguably, Leibniz eventually regarded as *the* set of such basic features.

Part II starts with an examination of Leibniz's reasons which, most probably, prompted him to define substance in the proposed way and not otherwise (chapter 1). Then I offer (in chapters 2–4) a detailed analysis and interpretation of the selected features, in conformity with the reasoning established in chapter 1 of part II and with the framework established earlier in chapter 2 of part I. *Ipsa facto*, an integration of Leibniz's conception of substance into his broader philosophical project should be achieved.

2. HISTORICAL METHODOLOGY

Though I sometimes employ contemporary conceptual and explanatory tools in the course of this work, I do not intend to relate Leibniz's philosophy to recent approaches to philosophical problems.³ My goal is rather (all the hermeneutical complications notwithstanding) a faithful account of what *Leibniz* thought, i.e. to arrive at a clear statement of a doctrine which would be recognizable to Leibniz as his own.

According to Robert Sleigh,⁴ two basic components can be distinguished in carrying out such an exegetical task:⁵ (1) the *fact-finding* component, which aims at a textually supported account of what the author in question thought concerning a given topic at a given time, the proper goal being not just to collect the author's statements but rather, in Sleigh's phrase, "to formulate the author's central views on the topic in hand in sentences such that *we* know what propositions those sentences express and those propositions are the very ones our author accepted" (Sleigh (1990), 4). And there is what Sleigh calls (2) the *explanatory* component; it consists

3 Whether it is an attempt to subject Leibniz's views to an evaluation in terms of current standards of philosophical significance, or to set out *a priori* a philosophical theory inspired by some of Leibniz's ideas but reviewed in certain respects, or finally to provide what Bennett calls a 'collegial approach' (Bennett (2001), 1), viz. treating "those who are great but dead as if they were great and living, as persons who have something to say to us now" (Grice, H.P.: "Reply to Richards". In: Grandy, R.E., Warner, R. (eds.): *Philosophical Grounds of Rationality: Intentions, Categories, Ends*. Oxford 1986, p. 66. Quoted in Bennett (2001), 1).

4 Cf. Sleigh (1990), 4–6.

5 A good deal of work has been done by recent commentators on Leibniz regarding the methodological issues: see especially Mat 3–13; Sleigh (1990), 2–6; Ad 5f.; Bennett (2001), I, 1–9. I draw on their achievements in the present section. Sleigh (1990), 2–6 calls the exegetical approach "exegetical history" of philosophy as opposed to "philosophical history" of philosophy.

in an “effort to explain *why* the philosopher under scrutiny thought and said what he did” (*ibid.*). The goal here is, then, to formulate “a unified hypothesis about motivations, patterns of inference, and principles employed, but not stated, by our philosopher” (*ibid.*, 6). By the same token, “[t]he claim accompanying the hypothesis is not that the philosopher in question should have thought this way or might have thought this way, but rather that he *did* think this way” (*ibid.*).

The two moments are not entirely independent of each other. An advance in carrying out the fact-finding component can make a difference in the explanatory one; and *vice versa*, a new item obtained in delving into the given author’s basic reasons can affect the meaning of his or her explicit pronouncements. Second, both historical erudition and purely philosophical acumen are to be hitched up in single harness in pursuing the exegetical approach. An exaggeration of the historical erudition causes the fact-finding moment to degenerate into a superficial manipulation of jargon, and the explanatory moment into a philosophically useless construing of ‘influences’ of all kinds, in both cases with little regard to the meaning of what the author actually says. On the other hand, ignorance about the relevant historical setting runs the risk of degenerating into a tentative exercise in *a priori* reasoning, having to do less with the author subject to scrutiny than with the views of the commentator, thus leading, in effect, to the abandonment of the exegetical approach. I hope to have held to a course between these extremes and to have maintained a delicate balance between data and interpretation.

2.1 The Fact-Finding Component

Most of the methodological problems concerned in dealing with the textual basis are but too obvious. Yet two of them deserve our particular attention when dealing with Leibniz’s texts.

One is connected with the fact that Leibniz never wrote any *opus magnum* really deserving of the name. Moreover, his best insights are often scattered in a huge mass of private notes, sketches, and short studies, most of which were not intended for the public, and in the no less extensive mass of Leibniz’s correspondence, rather than in his published writings. One consequence is that instead of discussing a comparatively small number of statements set in a more or less stable context, the bulk of the fact-finding task concerning Leibniz’s philosophy is bound to piecing together dozens of passages, which often contain just hints or outlines. Moreover, even pieces from the same period sometimes imply different, or even contradictory results because Leibniz occasionally seems to intend his private papers as tentative sketches, internal polemics, thought-experiments and the like. The question then arises of what to regard as at least a part of Leibniz’s real doctrine. Obviously, one cannot but consider the frequency of occurrence, the broader context of Leibniz’s views, and the like. Another complication is that particularly in his letters, Leibniz is sometimes inclined to argue *ad hominem*, in the sense that the premises are not his own but the correspondent’s. Considerable circumspection is thus required when private papers from Leibniz’s *Nachlass* are made use of.

The other problem worth pointing out concerns the compatibility of the texts from various periods. Leibniz was certainly subject to intellectual development and did change his mind on many topics; in these cases, the concern with dating and determining the diachronical relations of the texts is essential for the fact-finding task. I nonetheless hold that as far as fundamental commitments and principles are concerned, there seems to occur no substantial change during Leibniz's career.⁶ I am well aware that assumptions based on this belief may remain no more than interpretative hypotheses. Yet I adopt a 'synchronic' approach to Leibniz's texts and feel free to assemble texts from different periods in support of my claims. I insert dating or even discuss the issue only when I believe it does or might matter.

2.2 The Explanatory Component

It will be agreed that Leibniz's philosophy, and his doctrine of substance in particular, is grounded in, and stems from, considerations concerning the conditions of the philosophical project as such; this amounts to saying no more than that Leibniz was a true philosopher. It is natural to suppose that such a grounding crucially determines how the basic items are employed within the system; and that, in particular, its examination should contribute considerably to an understanding of Leibniz's doctrine of substance at the explanatory level. Yet serious attempts to make the connections in question explicit and to clarify how exactly they affect the doctrine at issue have seldom been undertaken as far as I know.⁷ The reasons lie ready to hand: Leibniz is not exactly explicit on these matters, so that all too often one must be content with mere hints, and even ready to read between the lines. Interpretative attempts in this field thus become a tricky affair; a larger amount of tentative reconstruction, completion and even amendment must be involved than would perhaps normally be regarded admissible in a study which is after all substantially historical. Accordingly, since I am, despite all these dangers, about to examine the indicated fundamentals, I may no doubt be in error in some of my claims, and complaints of a certain arbitrariness can be responded to only to a limited extent. These circumstances of course impose limitations upon my conclusions.

To appreciate that the project is still worth the risk, consider e.g. a list of the most frequent features commonly agreed to have to do with a definition of what Leibniz refers to by the term 'substance':⁸

- 6 Here I follow in particular Benson Mates and Laurence McCullough: cf. Mat 7f.; 251ff.; Cull 8f. They make the point explicitly and support it with several arguments. Some commentators, like e.g. Adams (1994) and Rutherford (1995a) and (1995b), seem to be at least sympathetic to such a stance.
- 7 The most important exceptions regarding Leibniz's conception of substantiality include Jalabert (1947), Gurwitsch (1974), Stegmaier (1977), Mercer (1995) and (2001), and Ruth. Kaehler (1989) and Grosholz & Yakira (1998) offer groundbreaking accounts of Leibniz's views on the nature and role of rationality as such; they do not apply them to his conception of substance, however.
- 8 There are dozens of references to each of the statements on the list. For some of them cf. nn. 289; 398; 492; 495; 497.

Substance is a being which: is capable of action / spontaneous; is *unum per se* / simple / without parts; is not predicable of anything else (except itself) / is a suppositum / an ultimate subject; persists through change; has a complete concept / is complete; expresses / represents / mirrors everything in the universe.

There arise at least three interconnected questions whose solution is a *sine qua non* for any solid theory as to what Leibniz's real conception of substantiality might have been: (1) What are the logical relations among the features? (2) Do the features converge in a *unitary* conception at all? (3) Which (if any) of them enter *the* Leibnizian definition of substance? It will be agreed that these questions have been extremely controversial up to the present. And it seems to me that until the relations between Leibniz's conception of substance and the fundamental considerations mentioned are made explicit and sufficiently analyzed, no promising clue will be forthcoming.

3. CONVENTIONS

The abbreviations I employ are listed on pp. 170f. In citing Leibniz, I follow, whenever possible, the Academy edition which has become by far the most reliable critical edition of Leibniz's writings.⁹ The Academy edition is cited by series, volume, and page, in the following form: A <number of series (Roman)>, <number of volume (Roman)>, <number of page>, e.g. A VI, I, 15. The Gerhardt editions of Leibniz's philosophical and mathematical writings are cited by volume and page, in the following form: GP/GM <number of volume (Roman)>, <number of page>, e.g. GP II, 43; GM VII, 19. Manuscripts not contained in any edition are cited, as is customary, by reference to signatures in the catalogues of Leibniz's *Nachlass* in Bodemann (1889) and (1895). If a cited passage is taken from a better-known, usually entitled, text or from a significant correspondence, I indicate it in square brackets immediately following the citation (see the list of abbreviations). My insertions in quotations are enclosed in square brackets. Dating, if given, is put in square brackets at the end of the reference. I rely on the Academy edition in this and also borrow the convention of putting "(?)" where the dating is based only on watermarks or other indirect evidence.

The distinction between linguistic expressions, propositions / concepts, and things falling under concepts is employed quite heavily in the study. I use quotation marks to indicate designations of linguistic expressions as contrasted with propositions and / or concepts. Expressions that start with a capital letter designate concepts as contrasted with things or linguistic expressions if the phrase 'the concept of _' is not suitable. The same conventions hold *mutatis mutandis* for variables and constants.¹⁰

9 Recently it covers all of Leibniz's philosophical texts up to 1690 plus the *Nouveaux essais* of 1704 and his philosophical correspondence up to 1694.

10 I follow Mat 51f. here. Since Leibniz proves to be quite careless when dealing with these semantical issues, his own texts unfortunately cannot always be interpreted in full conformity with this usage.