Introduction

Massimo Mugnai

This text was first published by Gaston Grua in his collection of Leibniz's philosophical papers (Leibniz 1948: 546 ff.) and has been now republished, with some minor corrections, in volume 4A, series VI of the German critical edition of Leibniz's works (Leibniz 1999: 994-996). This is the first translation into English.

Here, Leibniz discusses a peculiar form of the problem concerning the relationship that contingent properties maintain with the substance to which they belong. With 'substance' Leibniz means an *individual (organic) being* like a particular man, a dog or a tree. Contingent properties may be defined in modal terms as those properties that a given existing subject actually has but it may lack, still continuing to exist. The specific form of the problem tackled by Leibniz is the following: when some contingent property of a given substance changes, does the change involve the substance itself or not? If the answer is 'yes', then even the substance will change together with the changing property. But then, the problem arises how can the substance remain the same *after* the change.

Leibniz considers three different cases:

1) Any change of an accidental property of an individual substance implies a change of the entire substance;
2) Any change of an accidental property of an individual substance implies a change of only a part of the individual substance;
3) Accidental properties are not intrinsic modifications of the substance, but mere *relations*, i.e., something extrinsic to the individual substance.

Case (1), since every existing thing undergoes continuous changes, has the unwelcome consequence according to which no individual substance remains the same during even the shortest amount of time. Case (2) may be interpreted in two different ways:

2.1) the changing part has some kind of real connection with the part which has not changed;

philinq IV, 2-2016, pp. 125-130
ISSN (print) 2281-8618-ETS

2.2) the changing part has no real connection with the part that has not changed.

If (2.1) is true, and if the connection that the changing part has with the unchanged one "affects the substantial reality", it is not clear "how the accidental reality may perish without causing any change in the substantial one". Thus, this case becomes analogous to that of the ship of Theseus; and, because of the sorites, the substance, change after change, does not remain the same. As Leibniz writes: 'if one removes bit by bit all the parts that compose a thing, the thing would be the same according to the name, such as the ship of Theseus', but it would not be the same.

If, however, the changing part has no real connection with the part of the substance which has not changed (Case 2.2), then we are dealing with a kind of strong and quite implausible dualism: on one hand there are the accidental properties of the substance and on the other hand the substance itself, which is supposedly not affected by the change of the accidents. This point of view is not plausible, because it is at odds with the usual claim that some accidental properties *belong* to a substance and that in many cases they are distinguishing marks of it (the accidental property of Socrates being snub-nosed, for example).

To understand why Leibniz refuses case (3) as well, we need to have some acquaintance with the scholastic (and late-scholastic) ontology of relations. According to the scholastic point of view, (real) relations strictly depend on the monadic properties of the related individuals. The relation of similarity between Socrates and Plato, for instance, depends on the fact that both have a property, which is the same according to the species. Thus, Socrates is similar to Plato because Socrates is wise and Plato is wise. This means that relations cannot change 'by themselves', i.e., without a change of the monadic properties on which they are grounded. If Socrates is dyed with black ink, then he ceases to be similar to Plato regarding whiteness. As Aristotle writes[1] a relation cannot change without a change in the related subjects. Therefore, if accidents have the same nature of relations, they must be grounded on more fundamental properties of the related subjects, and once again we are facing the same problems encountered with Case (1) and Case (2).

If we disregard the philosophical jargon and the reference to Spinoza and the Averroists, which are a little out of fashion, this text echoes contemporary metaphysical discussions concerning the nature of substance, the identity of an individual through time, the possibility of giving a reductionist account of substance in terms of properties, the existence of a substrate or 'thin particular'

[1] Aristotle, *Phys.* V, 2, 225b 10-13.

offering a kind of support to the properties, etc. But what is probably the most interesting aspect of this essay is Leibniz's personal solution to these problems. Leibniz, indeed, suggests resorting to a kind of 'pragmatic' nominalism. When we refer to the accidental properties of a given individual, we usually employ names (corresponding to the English expressions) such as 'white', 'red', 'hot', etc. We usually think of these names as referring to something real, susceptible of multiple instantiations. This 'something' is mainly denoted by abstract names as 'whiteness', 'redness', etc. (at least this happens into the field of traditional metaphysics). Yet, it is precisely to believe that to these abstract terms something real does correspond, inhering in the individual substances, to give rise to thorny disputes concerning the reality of the accidental properties. To avoid these disputes, Leibniz suggests the well-known nominalistic move of considering the abstract terms not as corresponding to things, 'but as a kind of shorthand for the discourse'. As Quine writes in "On What There is": "[…] the word 'red' or 'red object' is true of each sundry individual entities, which are red houses, red roses, red sunsets: but there is not in addition, any entity whatever, individual or otherwise, which is named by the word 'redness'" (1990: 10). Leibniz, however, does not claim that nothing real corresponds to the abstract terms, as one would expect from a full-fledged nominalist. He doesn't commit himself to the claim that "universals are mere words", as he had more than fifteen years ago in the Preface to the Nizolius's work (1670). He simply says, instead, that if someone were to ask "whether there is something real that perishes and is born, which corresponds to a given change", or "whether there are different realities in a substance that are the foundations of different predicates" it would be very difficult to answer. It is because we don't know whether something real corresponds to the names we employ to name the properties in general that it is more advisable to consider the individual substances as things and "to state truths about them". Thus, Leibniz explicitly characterizes his nominalism as a nominalism *per provisionem*, i.e. "for precautionary reasons".

Massimo Mugnai
massimo.mugnai@sns.it
Scuola Normale Superiore, Pisa

References

Leibniz, G.W., *Textes inédits,* 2 volumes, Paris, Presses Universitaires de France, 1948.
Leibniz, G.W., *Philosophische Schriften*, Berlin, Akademie Verlag, 1999.
W.V. Quine, W.V., 1990, "On What There is", in *From a Logical Point View*, Harvard University Press, Cambridge MA.

On the reality of accidental properties [1688]

Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz

It is worth considering if accidental properties have some kind of reality superior to the modal one and what the nature of this reality is. Surely, if we consider accidental properties as real, then their reality either is a part of the reality of the substance, or it adds new reality to the substance. If it is a part of the reality of the substance, it follows that the very substance perishes through the accidental changes, i.e., it becomes a different thing. Thus, yesterday I wasn't yet myself, but another [person], albeit one very similar to me, in the same way as a ship which is repaired, or a State [*res publica*] or a river are all the same according to the name, but not in reality. If we remove a part of a thing, indeed, this latter doesn't continue to be the same, even if it is called the same by virtue of the surviving main part. Otherwise, it could happen that, if we progressively remove all the parts now inhering in the thing, this will be said to be the same, as the ship of Theseus. On the other hand, if we think that the part is left always unchanged, then the part will still remain the same, whereas the whole, which is supposed to coexist with it, will not be [the same]. Therefore, if some people want a part of the reality [of the substance] to persist, while another part is changing, they fall back into the opinion of those who want the accidental properties to add something to the reality of the substance. If other people, instead, suppose that the substance dies and comes into being through the changes (an opinion held by the Duke of Buckingham in his ingenious booklet written for the truth of the religion),[2] then they actually remove any changeable substance. Given that things change perpetually so that nothing remains in the same state for even the smallest amount of time, it follows that it [i.e., the substance] does not endure even a minimal amount of time. What in any moment is born and then perishes cannot be said to exist in a proper sense, for it does not act or undergo anything, because everything needs time to exist. So, it will follow

[2] See G. V. Duke of Buckingham, *A Short Discourse upon the Reasonableness of Men's having a Religion, or Worship of God*, London, 1685.

from this that all changeable substances would be removed from nature, and therefore we will slip back into the doctrines of Spinoza and the Averroists and of those ancient thinkers who, because they consider only God to be substance or Nature, regard creatures as the modes of God. In this case too, they cannot avoid being forced to transfer to God the changes they took away from substances, yet then even God does not last, but will unceasingly die and be born. Therefore, as a consequence of all this we have that, in the end, nothing at all does exist. If everything at least once dies, as it follows from this position, there will be nothing, indeed, that will revive it: from nothing nothing is generated and nothing comes spontaneously to life from nothing. Therefore, something needs to persist when things are changing. Because if a part of the divine reality persists, while a part perishes, we come back again to those who add accidental realities to the substantial ones; but, then, why could we not admit in the creatures what we say now to be in God, and for this reason simply stick to created substances?

Let us come now to those who think that the substances have a twofold reality, one substantial and the other accidental. These too encounter some difficulties, which are peculiar to their position. We may ask, indeed, why does one believe that the super-added reality inheres in the substance, as in a subject, and why does one not consider it to be a thing in itself, even though it does not persist? If this inherence, being some kind of real connection, affects the substantial reality, it is not clear how the accidental reality may perish without causing any change in the substantial one. The entire substance would, therefore, divide again into perishing and persisting parts, contrary to the hypothesis.

If, instead, we deny any reality to the accidental properties, as if they were nothing else than relations, we fall again into troubles. Because a relation, indeed, results from the state of things, it will never emerge or perish unless some change takes place in its foundation.

It seems to me that, till now, the only way to avoid these obstacles has been to consider the abstract terms not as corresponding to things, but as a kind of shorthand for the discourse: if I name the heath, for example, it is not necessary that I say that there is something that is hot; and it is exactly on this point that I am a nominalist, even though it is only to be precautious. I will therefore say that the substance changes, meaning that, in different times, its attributes are different, since this is beyond any doubt. It is not necessary, however, to ask whether there is something real that perishes and is born, which corresponds to a given change, nor whether there are different realities in a substance that are the foundations of different predicates. If someone were to pose these questions, it would be very difficult to answer them.

It suffices alone to consider the [individual] substances as things and to state truths about them. Even the geometers do not employ definitions of abstractions, but reduce them to concrete terms; thus Euclid does not employ the definition of a ratio, which he actually has, but he uses the definition in which he explains what things are said to have the same, a greater or a lesser ratio.