

Leibniz on Primitive Concepts and Conceiving Reality

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In this paper, we consider what is commonly referred to as Leibniz's argument for primitive concepts. After presenting and criticizing (in sections 1 and 2) one recent rather straightforward way of interpreting this argument, by Paul Lodge and Stephen Puryear, which takes the argument to be merely about the structure of concepts, we offer an alternative way of looking at the argument. We think it is best seen as being fundamentally about the relation between thought and reality. In order to prepare the ground for our reconstruction (which we present in section 5), we have to introduce his view of ideas or concepts (section 3), as well as some metaphysical principles concerning reality-dependence (section 4).

1. The Argument

In his early piece, *Of an Organum or Ars Magna of Thinking*, Leibniz offers the following argument for why, in his own terms, insofar as we conceive anything, there needs to be something that is conceived through itself:

Whatever is thought by us is either conceived through itself [*per se*], or involves the concept of another.

Whatever is involved in the concept of another is again either conceived through itself or involves the concept of another; and so on.

So one must either proceed to infinity, or all thoughts are resolved into those which are conceived through themselves.

If nothing is conceived through itself, nothing will be conceived at all. For what is conceived only through others will be conceived only in so far as those others are conceived, and so on; so that we may only be

said to conceive something in actuality when we arrive at those things which are conceived through themselves.¹ (A VI.iv 156/MP 1–2.)

The expressions “conceived through itself” and “conceived through something else” may at first sight appear a bit obscure. One initial worry is that there seems to be some ambiguity in Leibniz’s formulation. He can be taken to be talking about what we are thinking about, about *things* conceived, on the one hand, or about our *thinking* or *conceiving* of those things, on the other.

A natural way to try to make Leibniz’s claims clearer is to take the argument to be about concepts, i.e. about something in our minds, about the constituents of our thoughts, and to understand the argument as trying to show that there has to be primitive or simple concepts in order for there to be complex concepts. As textual evidence for this kind of reading one can refer to another of Leibniz’s early texts, *An Introduction to a Secret Encyclopaedia*, where he writes that “we can have no derivative concepts except by the aid of a primitive concept.” (A VI.iv 529/MP 7.) On this view, for a concept to be complex (or derivative) is for it to have constituent concepts into which it can be analyzed. For a concept to be simple or primitive (we will use these terms interchangeably here) is for it to lack such constituents. For example, the concept *man* is complex because it can be analyzed into the concepts *animal* and *rational*. Similarly, the concept *animal* is complex because it can be analyzed into, say, the concepts *corporeal* and *living*. The point of the argument would be that relatively more complex concepts (such as *man*) result from a combination of relatively less complex concepts (such as *animal*), which in turn

¹ It may be useful to have the full quote in the original Latin:

Quicquid cogitatur a nobis aut per se concipitur, aut alterius conceptum involvit.

Quicquid in alterius conceptu involvitur id rursus vel per se concipitur vel alterius conceptum involvit. Et ita porro.

Itaque vel eundem est in infinitum, vel cogitationes omnes resolvuntur in eas quae per se concipiuntur.

Si nihil per se concipitur, nihil omnino concipietur. Nam quod non nisi per alia concipitur, in tantum concipietur in quantum alia illa concipiuntur et hoc rursus ita: ac proinde tum demum actu ipso aliquid concipere dicemur, cum in ea quae per se concipiuntur incidemus.

result from other relatively less complex concepts, until some simple concepts are reached, which are not the result of any combination.

Such a reading is offered by Paul Lodge and Stephen Puryear, who propose to clarify Leibniz's argument by substituting "primitive concept" for "conceived through itself" and "complex concept" for "conceived through something else," resulting in the following reconstruction of the *Ars Magna* argument:²

- (1) Every concept is either primitive or complex, i.e., composed of other concepts (assumption).
- (2) Every concept that composes a complex concept is itself either primitive or complex (from (1)).
- (3) Complex concepts are either composed of other concepts to infinity, or ultimately composed of primitives (from (2)).
- (4) Complex concepts are conceived only insofar as their constituents are conceived (assumption).
- (5) A complex concept is conceived only if it is ultimately composed of primitives (from (4)).
- (6) If a complex concept is composed of other concepts to infinity, then it will not be conceived (from 5).

This only establishes the conditional conclusion (6) and not the existence of primitive concepts. It seems, however, that Leibniz does intend the argument to show the existence of primitive concepts. As Lodge and Puryear (henceforth L&P) point out, he seems to rely on the following additional premise:

- (7) Some complex concepts are conceived (unstated assumption).

This premise allows us to draw the intended conclusion:

- (8) Some complex concepts are not composed of other concepts to infinity (from (6), (7)).
- (9) Some concepts are ultimately composed of primitives (from (3), (8)).

² Lodge & Puryear 2006/7, 178.

(10) There are primitive concepts (from (9)).

L&P's reconstruction also serves to bring out some difficulties with the argument, which we will consider next.

2. Some Problems with the Argument

The first problem has to do with the fact that the argument does not only show that there are primitive concepts, but also that insofar as we conceive a complex concept we also conceive its primitive constituents. (This follows from (4).) It has been suggested that for Leibniz conceiving x implies awareness of x .³ If this is true, then it would further follow that in conceiving a complex concept, we are aware of all of its constituents, down to the primitives. To conceive a complex concept would mean that one is able to provide the full analysis of it. The problem is that Leibniz explicitly denies the last claim. He holds for example that we are aware of the concepts of colors without being aware of what they contain (this is distinctive of what he calls clear and confused concepts (e.g. A VI.iv 585f./AG 23f.)). In fact, Leibniz is rather skeptical of the possibility that we would ever be capable of analyzing our complex concepts into primitives. As he explains in *An Introduction to a Secret Encyclopaedia*: “A concept is primitive when it cannot be analysed into others [...] But it can be doubted whether any concept of this kind appears distinctly to men.” (A VI.iv 529/MP 7; cf. A VI.iv 590/AG 26.)

L&P's main aim is to show that this alleged problem is not a problem. The reason is that it is incorrect to ascribe to Leibniz the thesis that conceiving x implies awareness of x .⁴ In that case, there seems to be no conflict between, on the one hand, claiming that in order to conceive a complex concept we need to conceive all of its constituents, and, on the other hand, denying that we are capable of analyzing all complex concepts. At a general level the notion of unconscious conceiving fits nicely with Leibniz's thesis that much of our mental life is unconscious. More particularly, L&P

³ See Plaisted 2003, 338. He relies on *Discourse on Metaphysics* 27: “the expressions in our soul, whether we conceive them or not, can be called ideas, but those we conceive or form can be called notions, concepts [*conceptus*].” (A VI.iv 1572/AG 59.)

⁴ They persuasively argue that *Discourse* 27 does not constitute textual evidence for this thesis (Lodge & Puryear 2006/7, 193).

point to the fact we can *have* and *use* concepts without being aware of them, in line with how Leibniz in the *New Essays* claims that we use the principle of contradiction without being aware of the principle or its constituent concepts (*impossibility, being*, etc.) (NE 76, 83–84). L&P do not go so far as claiming that conceiving a concept is just having or using it, but it is not quite clear what, in their view, is involved in conceiving a concept in addition to merely having or using it. One might worry that this additional aspect of unconscious conceiving will come close to having the analysis of a concept, which (as we have seen) would be problematic. While we agree with L&P that conceiving for Leibniz does imply awareness, their reading leaves the nature of conceiving somewhat obscure.

Another difficulty with the argument, also noted by L&P, concerns the crucial step from (4) to (5). There are in fact two related problems here. The first has to do with the motivation for (4): why should it be the case that in order to conceive a complex concept, I need to conceive all of the constituents of that concept? Couldn't I conceive, for example, *gold* without conceiving all of its constituents? The second problem is that even if we accept (4) this does not rule out the possibility of infinitely complex concepts. Hence we cannot from (4) conclude that (5) – that a complex concept is conceived only if it is ultimately composed of primitives.

In order to motivate assumption (4) as well as to understand the move from (4) to (5), L&P suggest that Leibniz accepts the following further thesis concerning concepts, which they call the *Inheritance Thesis*:

(IT) Complex concepts inherit (or borrow) their content from the concepts that compose them. (Lodge & Puryear 2006/7, 189.)

They claim that if we accept (IT), then (4) follows: “If complex concepts must (continually) borrow their content from the constituents, then it would stand to reason that we cannot conceive a complex concept without in the process conceiving its constituents. For in grasping the (borrowed) content of a complex concept, we would in effect be grasping the content of its components.” (Lodge & Puryear 2006/7, 189.) Support for attributing (IT) to Leibniz is supposed to be found in a simile he offers in *Ars magna* as an illustration of the argument:

I will illustrate this by a simile. I give you a hundred crowns, to be received from Titus; Titus will send you to Caius, Caius to Maevius; but if you are perpetually sent on in this way you will never be said to have received anything. (A VI.iv 156/MP 2.)

According to L&P this continual deferring of the payment can be characterized as a matter of the payment's being borrowed or inherited. The simile, they claim, also allows us to see how (IT) helps to explain the move to (5), that is, how the regress can be blocked: "Just as nothing will be received at all unless one of the people to whom we are sent actually pays [...] so also nothing will be conceived at all unless the complex concept ultimately resolves into concepts that do not inherit their content from others, since conceiving requires that there be a content to conceive." (Lodge & Puryear 2006/7, 189.)

There appears, however, to be something wrong with the suggestion that the simile straightforwardly illustrates (IT). L&P overlook what seems to be an important *disanalogy* between the two. In the simile I am given 100 crowns, but in order to receive the money I am perpetually sent onto new people. This means that I haven't received anything until there is someone who actually pays. (IT), on the other hand, assumes that complex concepts (such as *gold* or *triangle*) *have* content, even if that content is borrowed or inherited from its constituents. If complex concepts have content, something – some content – seems to be received already at the first stage, unlike in the simile, where nothing is received. While it may be true that the chain in the simile must terminate – if some money is given, there has to be some money to be collected – this is not so in the case of (IT). Given that there is content at the first stage, it is hard to see why the fact that this content is borrowed from the constituents would rule out a situation where those constituents in turn borrow their content from their constituents, and so on to infinity.

This means that that even if we accept that (IT) helps to motivate (4), it does not explain the move to (5), contrary to what L&P suggest. For in order to use (IT) to infer that a complex concept is conceived only if it is ultimately composed of primitives, the thesis would have to entail that there is no content at all – nothing received – until we reach some primitive concept, which, as we just saw, does not appear to be the case. The disanalogy between the simile and (IT) also means that we are left without a satisfactory

understanding of what Leibniz takes the point of the simile to be: how exactly is it intended to illustrate the argument? We believe that L&P's appeal to the notion of borrowing does in fact contain an important insight, but that it needs to be developed in a different direction (as we will argue in section 4 below) in order for it to help us with Leibniz's argument.

There is a third, and perhaps even deeper worry, about L&P's reconstruction. The conclusion of the argument reads: "we may only be said to conceive something in actuality when we arrive at those things which are conceived through themselves." For purposes of clarification L&P substitute (as we have seen) Leibniz's original formulation with (10): "There are primitive concepts." The problem is that these two formulations do not seem to be equivalent. The latter is a claim about the mereological structure of concepts: complex concepts have to be composed of simple or primitive concepts. The former is a claim about the connection between cognition and external reality: in order for us to conceive anything there has to be some *thing* that is conceived through itself.

It is true that in the argument Leibniz does not explicitly use the Latin *res*, but rather the pronouns *quicquid*, *alterius*, *ea*, etc. However, it seems clear that these are intended to refer to some external reality (things), rather than to something mental (concepts): in *Ars magna* Leibniz goes on to argue that that which is conceived through itself is "God himself [*Deus ipse*]" (A VI.iv 158/MP 2); in *An Introduction to a Secret Encyclopaedia* he talks explicitly about "the *thing* which is conceived through itself [*rei quae per se concipitur*], namely the supreme substance, that is, God" (A VI.iv 528–9/MP 7; our emphasis). The claim is then that in order to conceive anything, we need to conceive some (or rather *the*) basic reality.⁵ We will attempt to make some more sense of this idea in section 3 below. For now we are simply interested in bringing out the significance of Leibniz's emphasis on conceiving a *thing* through itself. (It is also worth noticing that the idea of there being a single primitive (God) does not fit very well with reading the argument as a matter of the mereology of concepts. For if the role of primitives is to serve as the basic building-blocks of

⁵ There seems to be an interesting connection to an idea that Olli Koistinen has brought out in Descartes (as well as in Spinoza and Kant): "For something to be possible, there must already be some existent things on which the possibility depends, and through which the possibility can be understood." (Koistinen 2014, 237.)

complex concepts, then there would have to be several (maybe infinitely many) primitives.)⁶

At this point it may be suggested that we are making too much of the contrast between, on the one hand, talk of concepts and, on the other hand, of things. After all, L&P do not mean to deny that Leibniz is concerned with conceiving *things*. In fact, they insist that the locution “conceiving (of) a concept” is “shorthand for something like ‘conceiving a *thing* through a concept’” (Lodge & Puryear 2006/7, 178 fn. 5). Still, it is hard to see that the idea of conceiving things has any substantial role to play in their reconstruction. Their presentation of the steps of the argument seems entirely consistent with staying neutral with respect to the question of whether there is any relationship between concepts and things. The argument appears, as already noted, simply to concern the structure of concepts.

This seems to leave Leibniz’s position vulnerable to Kant’s well-known objection in the *Critique of Pure Reason* that Leibniz created a mere “intellectual system of the world” (A 270/B 326). Famously, Kant claimed that the problem is that Leibniz thought of himself as able to arrive at objects merely through considering their concepts, failing to see that there is a gap between concept and object – that concepts alone do not allow us to reach reality. This is not the place to go further into the details of Kant’s criticism. Our point is simply that the contrast we have drawn attention to between concept-talk and thing-talk, cannot simply be overcome by asserting that we conceive things through concepts. At first sight, the claim that we conceive a primitive concept does not in itself license the inference to there being some *thing* that is conceived through that concept. And what seems important in Leibniz’s conclusion is precisely that we arrive at things.

We believe that the difficulty just described can be addressed by taking a closer look at the central terms used in the argument. This will also provide help with the other problems noted (the nature of conceiving, as well as the step from (4) to (5)).

⁶ In later writings Leibniz tends to talk about the primitives as the various attributes of God (e.g. A VI.iv 590/AG 26), which may perhaps be more easily fitted into a picture of Leibniz as engaging the question of the structure of concepts. To us it seems, however, more plausible to read the later texts in light of the earlier, so “attributes” refer to things or reality rather than to concepts. Indeed, this would be a natural reading from the perspective of Scholastic theology, which understood God’s attributes as following from – or even as aspects of – the divine essence.

3. Concepts, Ideas, and Expression

While it is natural to read the argument as concerned with concepts, and Leibniz himself sometimes formulates the argument in terms of concepts, this can easily lead astray. We need to pay attention to some deep differences between what is for us a familiar way of taking ‘concept’ and Leibniz’s way of understanding that term. Nowadays philosophers tend to think (in some respects following Kant) that concepts themselves offer us only a very “thin” cognitive relation to reality – they are mainly instruments we use in our thinking in order to pick up objects for our thoughts. We may be able to arrive at some analytic judgments on the basis of having the concept of, say, a cat – maybe that cats are animals and some other information of that sort. But in order to know more about cats, or in order to arrive at synthetic judgments about cats, we would have to go “outside” our concept, and rely on experience of the objects we pick up with the help of the concept.

Now, even if Leibniz is well aware of the need for experience in our knowledge of the world, his view of concepts is fundamentally different from many later views. In order to see this we can consider Leibniz’s attempts to define the term ‘idea’ (a term that is closely related to the term ‘concept’). One such attempt is in a short paper with the title “What is an idea?”, which Leibniz wrote in 1678. Leibniz starts there by saying that “by the term idea we understand something which is in our mind” (A VI.iv 1370/L 207). But not everything in our mind is an idea: there are also “thoughts, perceptions, and affections”. The latter are occurrent states, but ideas are not: “an idea consists, not in some act, but in the faculty of thinking”. To have an idea of something is to be able to think about it.

Leibniz argues, however, that this is not enough to define what it is to have ideas. One must still introduce the notion of *expression*: an idea of a thing must express the thing. The expression relation, as Leibniz explains it in “What is an idea?”, seems to be a very general cognitive relation: x expresses y if and only if “we can pass from a consideration of the relations in the expression [x] to a knowledge of the corresponding properties of the thing expressed” (A VI.iv 1370/L 207). This generality means that Leibniz can apply the notion to many, quite different cases: the model of a machine expresses the machine itself, an algebraic equation expresses a circle or some other figure, speech expresses thoughts, characters express numbers.

Ideas, however, are in certain respect quite peculiar as expressions.⁷ The most important peculiarity is that the expression relation between an idea and a thing is a necessary and internal relation. It may be possible to use a model of a machine as a model of some other machines as well. An idea of x , however, is essentially, in virtue of what it is, an idea of x and not of anything else. For Leibniz, this means that there is a connection between the individuation of ideas and the individuation of objects: it is not possible to individuate the idea of x independently of x . We could call this dependence *individivative expressivism*.⁸

For Leibniz this notion of idea has far reaching implications:

That the ideas of things are in us means therefore nothing but that God, the creator alike of the things and of the mind, has impressed a faculty of thinking, so that from its own operation it can derive what perfectly corresponds [*respondeant*] to what follows from things [*sequuntur ex rebus*]. Although, therefore, the idea of a circle is not similar to the circle, truths can be derived from it which would be confirmed beyond doubt by investigating a real circle. (A VI.iv 1371/L 208.)

One may at first wonder, whether Leibniz, in claiming that there is a “perfect correspondence” between ideas and the nature of things, assumes some kind of epistemic optimism based on his view of God. However, what he says is really meant to follow from his individivative expressivism concerning ideas. In fact, it seems rather trivial that if an idea of x is individuated by x , it is individuated by the nature of x (what x is).

At the same time, we can surely ask what this talk of *things* in individivative expressivism involves. If it is not possible to individuate an idea without a thing, does it follow that we can only have ideas of what actually exist? Here it is helpful to consider *Discourse on Metaphysics* §26 where Leibniz explains that “this quality of our soul, insofar as it [our soul] expresses some nature, form, or essence, is properly the idea of the thing” (A VI.iv 1570/AG

⁷ Leibniz’s notion of expression is often explained in terms of isomorphism (see. e.g. Swoyer 1995). But it seems to us that isomorphism is not enough to account for ideas as expressions, although we are not able to pursue this point in detail here.

⁸ ‘Expressivism’ as we use it here has of course nothing do with the term as used in contemporary philosophy of language and metaethics.

58). The emphasis on natures, forms, or essences is actually more adequate than the earlier talk of things. For it is not Leibniz's view that in order for us to have an idea of x , x needs to actually exist. We can have ideas of merely possible entities, but it does follow that even these should be what we could call *real possibilities*. The important point for our purposes here is that for Leibniz the being of ideas necessarily involves reality. (It is worth noticing, however, that he further holds that realities need to have a ground in some ultimate actual existent (God).⁹ As will we see, this grounding of realities in something ultimate plays an important role in the argument of *Ars Magna*.)

These points about ideas are true of concepts as well. Concepts are, as Leibniz says in § 27 of the *Discourse*, “those [expressions in our soul] we conceive or form” (A VI.iv 1572/AG 59). To have an idea is to have “in one's soul” something that expresses the nature of some real possibility; the actualization, as we might say, of this idea in thinking is a concept, or a conceiving.

The way of thinking introduced in this section concerning ideas and concepts is going to motivate our reconstruction of the *Ars Magna* argument. Before going into details some general points can be made:

First, it should now be more understandable that Leibniz seems to move rather freely from talk of “concepts” to talk of “conceiving things” to talk of “things conceived” in his formulation of the argument. This need not be a sign of confusion or ambiguity but rather just a sign that what we have called individuating expressivism is somehow involved in the argument. Thereby we can also arrive at a different understanding of Leibniz's implicit starting point. Rather than (as in L&P's (7)) take him to set out from our conceiving some *concept*, we take him to begin with our having a cognitive relation to some *thing* or *reality*.¹⁰ This would serve to mitigate Kantian qualms about the possibility to reach reality by starting with mere concepts. (At the same time, one might wonder whether such a move gives rise to another problem. We will try to say something about that at the end of section 5 below.)

Second, we can now also understand better why, even if conceiving something complex requires conceiving its ultimate constituents, there is no

⁹ In addition to the passages from *Ars Magna* discussed in section 4 below, see also a later writing such as the *Monadology* par. 44 (GP VI 614).

¹⁰ Koistinen (2009, 168) develops a somewhat similar idea in connection to Spinoza. For a helpful discussion of related issues in the Aristotelian tradition and Descartes see also Carriero 2009, 17ff.

implication of complete analysis – that is, we do not face the sort of worries about the nature of conceiving, which seem to arise on L&P’s reconstruction. In the case of conceiving a circle, what we conceive is not the concept of a circle, but the circle itself – that thing or reality. The relevant constituents are not concepts, but further things conceived, i.e. other realities on which conceiving the circle depends (for example space). Conceiving, we could perhaps say, is not a matter of exercising purely conceptual capacities, but involves reality conceived. We hope to clarify this line of thought in the course of next section, where we will focus on how Leibniz’s individuating expressivism can help us understand how the regress is supposed to be blocked. The conception of cognition as essentially involved with reality or things will allow us to develop in a different direction L&P’s insight that the notion of “borrowing” is important to the argument. For it is as a metaphysical notion, rather than as a conceptual one – as in L&P’s *Inheritance Thesis* – that borrowing has a key role to play.

4. Conceiving and Reality-Dependence

The thesis that some things or realities depend upon other things or realities for their reality – for what they are – is central to Leibniz’s metaphysics. He elaborates on the thesis in connection with the question of the nature of aggregates in a well-known passage from a letter to Arnauld: “every being by aggregation presupposes beings endowed with real unity, because every being derives its reality only from the reality of those of which it is composed.” (A II.ii 184/AG 85.) A herd of sheep (to use one of Leibniz’s examples) is an aggregation of sheep, and so the reality of the herd will depend on the reality of the sheep. There is, however, another case of reality-dependence – which has received somewhat less attention in the literature – but which seems more significant for the *Ars Magna* argument. In this case the dependence runs in the opposite direction: rather than one reality depending on a plurality of constituent realities, a plurality of realities (finite things) depend on a single reality (God). The thought is that we start with God’s being, reality or perfection, and that finite things are, as Leibniz explains in *Ars Magna*,

generated through negation or privation (limitation) of that reality.¹¹ Perhaps we can think of this relationship between a plurality of realities and a single basic reality somewhat along the lines of the way in which there can be a plurality of determinations of a single determinable. In *Ars Magna* Leibniz uses the case of figures in space as an analogy for how a multitude of things can be generated from a few: “granted space, body, a straight line, and continuous motion, one could also demonstrate the possibility of a circle; further, even a straight line can be demonstrated, granted space, body and continuous motion.” (A VI.iv 159/MP 3.)

Leibniz characterizes this relation of reality-dependence in terms of one thing’s *borrowing* reality from another (see e.g. LDV 301). It is important to notice that the notion of reality-borrowing is very strong. If x depends on y for its reality, then the very identity of x – what x is – depends on y . It is not only that x could not exist without y , but the specification of what x is, what its reality or being is, includes y (what y is): not only does the present existence of the herd depend on the sheep, but the specification of the reality of the herd includes the sheep (e.g. what the herd does involves the doings of the sheep). Similarly, the specification of the reality of determinates will include the determinable – a figure, as a description in space, includes space, and the specification of the reality of a finite thing includes divine reality.

The metaphysical thesis of reality-borrowing has important implications with respect to the nature of cognition, given Leibniz’s individuating expressivism. Let us consider an idea I that expresses reality x , and suppose that x borrows its reality from reality y . As I is individuated by the reality which it expresses, and reality-borrowing is a matter of the identity of x depending on y , it follows that in order for x to be expressed by I , y also needs to be expressed, and if the reality of y depends on z , z also needs to be expressed by I , and so on. Conversely, if I express x through the idea of y , then the reality of x must depend on y , for otherwise I would not be expressing x , but some other reality. The order of ideas must follow the order of realities. We can sum up this thesis – which we may call the *Borrowing Reality-Conceiving Principle* – in the terminology of *Ars Magna* by substituting ‘conceiving a thing’ for ‘idea’:

¹¹ In this connection, he uses a somewhat bewildering analogy with binary numbers (A VI.iv 156/MP 2).

(BC) If, and only if, some thing x borrows its reality from some other thing y , then if x is conceived, then y is conceived.

It is easy to see the connection to L&P's *Inheritance Thesis*, but also an important difference. (IT) is about conceptual content, whereas (BC) involves a claim about metaphysical dependence. Indeed, as we just saw, the motivation for (BC) lies in the notion of borrowing reality, together with individuating expressivism about ideas.

Does (BC) then help us to block the regress? This is perhaps not quite obvious. For at first sight (BC) may seem to be consistent with there being an infinite chain of reality-borrowers. The case of the herd of sheep appears to offer a good example. The reality of the herd borrows its reality from the sheep, but in some sense the sheep themselves are composite beings, and so also aggregates, and thus depend for their reality on their parts. Why would such a chain of reality-borrowing have to terminate?

Here we need to introduce a further idea, which Leibniz typically presents as a corollary of the notion of reality-borrowing. The idea is clearly formulated in a letter to De Volder: "And where there is no reality except that which is borrowed, there will never be reality, since it ultimately must be proper to some subject [*subjecto propria*]." (LDV 301.) Why must reality be proper to a subject? At one level it is perhaps rather trivial that if A borrows, say, a book, then the book must be owned by someone else, who hasn't herself borrowed it. The owner may either be B – the person from which A borrowed the book – or someone from whom B has borrowed it, and so on. It is, as it were, in the logic of borrowing that the chain of borrowers must terminate in an owner. This also helps us to understand how Leibniz can intend the case of a deferred gift of some money work as a simile illustrating the argument. The point of the simile is that no money is given unless there is somewhere some money to be collected. Analogously, if there is no owner, there is nothing to be borrowed.

The real question then is not whether such a chain has to terminate, but rather how to make sense of reality-dependence in terms of borrowing. For if x borrows its reality from y , not only does the identity of x depend on y , but the reality of x is somehow the very same reality as is found in y , and ultimately in a "reality owner," something to which that reality is "proper" –

in the same way as the book that I borrow is the very same book that is owned by someone else (although in the case of reality it seems as if the idea is that it is simultaneously present in both the borrower and the owner).

In order to make this notion of reality-borrowing seem less abstract, it may help to consider the focal case of *Ars Magna*, where a plurality of things are conceived through (and results as limitations or determinations from) God. If finite things are determinations of unlimited reality (whatever that exactly comes to), it does not seem so far-fetched that it is the same reality that is present in each determination. The determinations do not constitute new levels of reality, but are just variations of divine reality, just as figures can be seen as simply ways in which the very same space is bounded.

These considerations are not meant to in any way exhaust the nature of reality-dependence – there are, for example, important problems about the relationship of determinations (finite things) and determinable reality. Our aim has merely been to give a sense of the picture that motivates Leibniz to think of reality-dependence in terms of borrowing. For it is precisely the connection just outlined between borrowing and owning reality that seems to us to be the key to seeing how (BC) can help to block the regress in the *Ars Magna* argument. The following *Borrowing-Owning Reality Principle* is meant to capture that connection:

(BO) If there is some thing x that borrows its reality, there must be some other thing y that owns that reality, and y is an owner of that reality if, and only if, y is not a borrower of that reality (*Borrowing-Owning Reality Principle*).

While (BO) is, as already noted, not supposed to be an independent principle, but rather something that follows trivially from (BC), it will be helpful to introduce it separately for purposes of reconstructing the argument, which is what we will do next.¹²

¹² One might perhaps wonder whether this consideration would not be available to L&P: couldn't they too rely on something like (BO), but with respect to conceptual content? This would indeed be possible. One advantage with our reading is, however, that the metaphysical principles we rely on are to be found in Leibniz's writings (we do not introduce any new principles about concepts). In addition, it seems to us that the other problems with L&P's reading of the argument (discussed

5. The Argument Reconsidered

We suggested above (see section 3) that there is no ambiguity or confusion in Leibniz's tendency to move between talk of concepts, conceiving of things, and things conceived in different versions of the argument – provided we take individuating expressivism into consideration. However, for sake of clarity we will choose a formulation of the argument in terms of conceiving things, as this most lucidly conveys what we take to be Leibniz's view. Thus, in the following reconstruction of the argument, we have replaced Leibniz's 'concept' with 'conceiving a thing'. We have also chosen to render explicit the reference to *things* by replacing 'whatever is thought' (*quicquid cogitatur*) or 'another' (*aliud*) with 'if some thing is thought' and 'another thing'.

Let us then turn to the reconstruction itself:

- (1*) If some thing is thought by us, then it is either conceived through itself [*per se*], or conceived through some other thing (assumption).
- (2*) If some thing is conceived through some other thing, then that other thing is again either conceived through itself or conceived through some other thing (from (1*)).
- (3*) One must either proceed in conceiving one thing through another thing to infinity, or all thoughts are resolved into those things which are conceived through themselves (from (2*); not a premise in the argument).
- (4*) If some thing is conceived only through other things, then it will be conceived only insofar as those other things are conceived (only a reformulation of 2*).
- (4b) If, and only if, some thing x borrows its reality from some other thing y , then if x is conceived, then y is conceived (*Borrowing Reality-Conceiving Principle*).
- (4c) If there is some thing x that borrows its reality, there must be some other thing y that owns that reality, and y is an owner of that reality if, and only if, y is not a borrower of that reality (*Borrowing-Owning Reality Principle*).

in section 2 above) would remain, for example that it seems to fail to deliver the intended conclusion.

- (4d) If x owns reality, then x is conceived through itself (from 2* and (4b) and (4c)).
- (4e) If there is some thing x that borrows its reality from some other thing y , then there is some other thing than x that is conceived through itself (from (4d) and (4c)).
- (4f) If some thing x is conceived only through some other thing y , then there is some other thing than x that is conceived through itself (from (4e) and (4b)).
- (5*) If we conceive some thing, then we conceive some thing through itself (from (2*) and (4f)).¹³
- (6*) If nothing is conceived through itself, nothing will be conceived at all (from 5*).¹⁴
- (7*) We conceive some things (unstated assumption).
- (8*) There is some thing conceived through itself (from (6*), (7*)).

The numbering of the steps is meant to correspond to L&P's reconstruction, (1*) corresponding to their (1) etc., except our (8*), which corresponds to their (10). Steps (4b)–(4f) are steps added in our reconstruction. It is worth noticing that, even if it may look a bit complicated, when we formulate the argument in terms of conceiving things it actually becomes logically simpler than on L&P's reconstruction:

Firstly, we do not need anything corresponding to their steps (8) and (9), but can move directly from (7*) to the conclusion (8*).

Secondly, (3*) in our version does not figure as a premise in the argument, while L&P need to appeal to (3) in order to arrive at the conclusion. Our version seems more in keeping with how Leibniz himself presents the consideration about infinity, which we have expressed as (3*).

Thirdly, L&P need to add (4) – the claim that complex concepts are conceived only insofar as their constituents are conceived – as a new assumption, an assumption that needs to be motivated (a motivation that

¹³ In *Ars Magna* Leibniz here writes “conceive something in actuality,” but for purposes of clarity we have left out “in actuality,” since we do not think it is meant to add anything substantial, but merely works as emphasizing that conceiving is *actual* conceiving. We also take Leibniz's expression “we arrive at those things which are conceived through themselves” to be equivalent to “we conceive some thing through itself”.

¹⁴ This step is of course not necessary, but we include it, since it is included in *Ars Magna*.

raises some difficulties for L&P). Yet when we cast the argument in terms of conceiving things it turns out that the corresponding step (4*) is not a new assumption, but identical to (2*). It is thus not (4*) that needs to be motivated, but the step from (4*) to (5*). That motivation involves appeal to the *Borrowing Reality-Conceiving Principle* and the *Borrowing-Owning Reality Principle*. We have also chosen to articulate in some detail (steps (4b)–(4f)) how these principles help to deduce (5*).

For expository purposes we have left (3*) and (4*) as steps in the argument, even though logically speaking they are not needed.

A possible worry about our reconstruction is that it relies too heavily on metaphysical principles ((4b) and (4c)). Another worry has to do with what is, as it were, the starting-point of the argument – the claim that we do conceive some things (7*). While this formulation avoids what we suggested is a problem with L&P’s version – namely that it leaves the step from concepts to reality unaccounted for – it is easy to get the feeling that it does so by in some sense begging the question.

With respect to the first worry one could begin by saying that by introducing the metaphysical principles, the major gap in the argument is filled without otherwise introducing any significant changes in Leibniz’s formulation of it. Furthermore, this more metaphysical reconstruction stays much closer to the thrust of Leibniz’s argument, expressed in the conclusion that there has to be *things* conceived through themselves – it is an argument for the existence of ultimate reality. From a more general perspective, our interpretation suggests that Leibniz’s theory of cognition forms a unity with his metaphysics. Very few scholars nowadays would agree with Russell’s and Couturat’s famous claim that Leibniz’s whole philosophy is based in his logic (see Couturat 1901 and Russell 1937). However, recent interpretations still tend to retain a logical approach to Leibniz’s theory of concepts (this tendency is implicit in L&P’s reading). In contrast, our reading indicates that even the theory of concepts cannot be understood apart from his metaphysics.

The second worry raises some large issues that we cannot go into here. The basic question is whether Leibniz’s argument can speak to a more general worry (found in, for example, Kant) about the possibility of cognition of reality. The focus here would be on step (7*) in our reconstruction, and crucial question is how strong that assumption must be. It seems to us that the

argument might work even on quite a weak reading of (7*) – i.e. a weak understanding of the relevant notion of reality – but this is something that will have to be explored on another occasion.¹⁵

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