

The Priority of the Perfect in the Philosophical Theology of the Continental Rationalists

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IN THE THIRD OF HIS *MEDITATIONS*, Descartes says:

And I ought not to think that I do not perceive the infinite by a true idea, but only by negation of the finite, as I perceive rest and shadows by negation of motion and light; for on the contrary I clearly understand that there is more reality in infinite than in finite substance, and that hence the perception of the infinite is in some way prior in me to that of the finite; that is, the perception of God is prior to the perception of myself. (AT VII 45)¹

The conclusion of this passage astonishes readers today; it is so contrary to the modern tendency to seek to understand the more perfect, the more developed, in terms of the less perfect, the more rudimentary — to understand complex organisms, for instance, in terms of cells, cells in terms of molecules, molecules in terms of atoms, and the atoms in terms of subatomic particles.

It was not always so. That all things are to be understood in terms of their relation to the most perfect is a main theme of the Platonic tradition. And the modern determination to understand the more perfect in terms of the less perfect has roots in the rebellion against Aristotelian natural philosophy, and especially against its substantial forms that provided

¹ Cf. AT VII 113, 365. (For an explanation of references to the works of Descartes in this form, see Abbreviations, p. ix.) Although I have made some use of published English translations, I am in principle responsible for the translations from Latin and French in this essay.

principles of explanation — notably psychological and biological explanation — that could not be better understood by analysing complex beings into simpler or more primitive beings. Descartes was a leader in that revolution in natural philosophy, and famously reductionist in his biology. All the more striking, then, that in his philosophical theology, Descartes insists that the perception of the more perfect is prior to that of the less perfect.

There is a philosophical question here which I think is not of solely historical interest, though it will be viewed in this essay through a historical lens. The question is this. Is the less perfect to be understood in terms of the more perfect, or the more perfect in terms of the less perfect? Like Descartes, we should not assume that the answer to this question must be all or nothing either way. In our modern context it seems obvious that a strategy of interpreting the more perfect or more developed in terms of the less perfect or less developed — a ‘bottom-up’ strategy, as we may call it — is appropriate and fruitful in many contexts. But I think it is well worth exploring the hypothesis that there are also important contexts in which a ‘top-down’ strategy of understanding and representing the less perfect in terms of the more perfect or more complete will be the best.

Top-down strategies, in the indicated sense, are a persistent feature of the philosophical theologies of major philosophers on the European Continent in the early modern period — characteristic not only of Descartes, but also of some of his most notable successors, including Spinoza, Leibniz and Kant. Central to my own interest in the topic is a desire to see how much sense can be made of the, at first sight rather strange, notion of God as *ens perfectissimum* or *ens realissimum* that figures in the work of Leibniz and Kant; and the machinery of the Leibnizian version of that idea will be a main subject of this paper. But I begin with the rather different top-down strategies of Descartes and Spinoza.

Descartes

It is certainly not the case that top-down strategies were universally favoured in philosophical theology in the early modern period. John

Locke, for instance, proposes a quite general bottom-up strategy for representing divine perfection. I believe this is deeply connected with Locke's empiricist opposition to Descartes's belief in innate ideas,² though this is not the place to explore issues about innatism. According to Locke, 'when we would frame an *Idea* the most suitable we can to the supreme Being, we enlarge . . . with our *Idea* of Infinity' all our ideas of qualities desirable in ourselves.³

A similar bottom-up strategy had already been proposed to Descartes as part of Pierre Gassendi's objections to the Third Meditation (AT VII 287) and something of the sort is also found in the 'Second Objections' to the *Meditations* (AT VII 123).⁴ Such a strategy seems to work for some of the divine perfections most discussed in philosophical theology. Omniscience: I know some things, but God knows everything that's true. Omnipotence: I can accomplish some things, but God can accomplish absolutely anything that is intrinsically possible. Omnipresence and sempiternity: I am present at one place at a time, and have not been present at all at many times; but God is present at every place at every time. These are all cases in which the role of the 'idea of infinity', as Locke puts it, is assumed by universal quantification, which is used to generate a representation of a more perfect property from a representation of a quite ordinary property.

In other cases the role is assumed by the simpler machinery of negation. Imperishability and immutability: we know what it is for finite things to change and perish; God does not and cannot perish or even (on some views) change. Simplicity: God has no parts. Locke tells us to expect such negation in the construction of concepts of the perfect; for the idea of infinity is a negative construction on his view, 'the Negation of an end in any Quantity'.⁵ Even the constructions using universal quan-

² I have developed this point at some length in Robert Merrihew Adams, 'Where Do Our Ideas Come From? — Descartes vs. Locke', in Stephen P. Stich (ed.), *Innate Ideas* (Berkeley and Los Angeles, CA: University of California Press, 1975), pp. 71–87, especially pp. 81–2.

³ John Locke, *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding*, ed. Peter H. Nidditch (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1975), II, xxiii, 33.

⁴ The Objections are printed in AT together with Descartes's *Meditations*, as they were in his lifetime.

⁵ Locke, *Essay*, II, xvii, 15.

tification have a negative aspect, for (as logicians know) the universal quantifier is implicitly negative. To say that God knows everything is to say that there is no fact that God does not know. Whatever facts God knows, it is essential to God's omniscience not only that God knows those facts, but also that there are no more facts to be known.

It was perceptive therefore of Descartes to associate the question whether the representation of the finite is prior to that of the infinite with the question whether the infinite is to be represented 'only by negation of the finite' (AT VII 45). To the extent that representations of divine perfections are constructible from more ordinary predicates by operations of negation and universal quantification, they are not prior to representations of less perfect things. Descartes claims that God's perfections are too positive to be constructible in that way. This claim is at the centre of an interesting argument against the possibility of a bottom-up construction of the idea of the infinite, which Descartes presents in a letter of August 1641 to 'Hyperaspistes'. It runs as follows (AT III 427):

- 1 'What makes the infinite different from the finite is something real and positive;
- 2 'on the other hand, however, the limitation which makes the finite different from the infinite is non-being or the negation of being.
- 3 'But that which is not cannot bring us to the knowledge of that which is . . .'
- 4 Therefore 'we do not understand the infinite by the negation of limitation.' (In other words, a negation or limitation of being does not provide, even by way of its own negation, the material for an understanding of a richer being.)

This seems to me a serious argument, whose premises have considerable plausibility. It cannot show, and perhaps is not meant to show, that a bottom-up approach cannot give us a negative concept of infinity which does indeed apply to God. But I think it does at least show how such a bottom-up strategy may be unable to give us more than a deficient understanding of the infinite, inasmuch as one who knows that the infinite contains more than the finite may still be far from knowing the more that it contains.

The obvious empiricist response to this argument is to deny that we

can know the more that the infinite contains, and in that sense to deny that we can come to the knowledge of the infinite, in its superiority to the finite. Just such a denial is part of Gassendi's argument for a bottom-up approach to the concept of God:

God [he says] is certainly infinite distances above every concept; and when our mind prepares itself to contemplate him, it is not only clouded in darkness but is reduced to nothing . . . [I]t is more than enough if . . . we can derive and construct an idea of some sort for our own use . . . which does not transcend a human concept and which contains no reality except what we perceive in other things or as a result of encountering other things. (AT VII 287–8)

It is easy to read Descartes as yielding ground to Gassendi on this point. He agrees — indeed emphasises — that our understanding of the divine perfection is extremely incomplete; and there are actually several texts in which he seems to admit a bottom-up approach by allowing that the human mind has the ability to represent divine perfections by 'amplifying' its ideas of the limited perfections of finite things.⁶ He usually goes on to argue that our faculty of amplifying our ideas shows that our mind, which possesses it, must have been created by God (AT III 64, 427–8; VII 370–71) — a conclusion that, if granted, is well suited to the causal argument of the Third Meditation. It does nothing, however, to sustain the necessity, or even the possibility, of a top-down strategy in understanding the constitution of finite and infinite perfections.

Descartes was probably less interested in the top-down strategy than in the causal argument for theism. There is one passage, however, in his response to Gassendi, in which he proposes an inference in which our faculty of amplifying ideas of limited perfections is treated as evidence supporting a top-down approach, presupposing not only a causal dependence on God, but also an idea of God's perfection. Descartes asks, 'how could we have a faculty for amplifying all created perfections . . . were it not for the fact that there is in us an idea of something greater, namely God?' (AT VII 365).

⁶ AT III 64, 427–8; VII 137–9, 365, 370–71. Jean-Luc Marion, *Sur la théologie blanche de Descartes*, 2nd edn. (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1981), pp. 393–4, has been helpful in locating these texts.

Why would a faculty of amplifying ideas of limited perfections presuppose an idea of infinite perfection? The most interesting answer to this question offered by Descartes comes from a letter to Clerselier, dated 23 April 1649, only months before his death.

Now I say that the notion I have of the infinite is in me before that of the finite, for just from the fact that I conceive being or that which is, without thinking whether it is finite or infinite, it follows that it is infinite being that I conceive; but in order to be able to conceive a finite being, I must cut back something from that general notion of being, which therefore must precede it.⁷

Here the general notion of being, the notion of being as such or of being pure and simple, is identified with that of infinite being. The conception of a finite being depends on that of infinite being because it contains the general notion of being, which *is* that of infinite being. We may conceive of being in a general way ‘without thinking whether it is finite or infinite’; implicitly, however, it is infinite being that we conceive in this way, for the conception of a finite being is constructed from that of infinite being by taking something away from it. This is plainly a top-down construction of the notion of finite being.

I do not suppose that being is the only property whose perfection Descartes would understand in a top-down way. I think Stephen Menn is probably right in arguing that Descartes understands the perfections of mentality in a similar way, though that does not seem unambiguously implied in the texts. But what Descartes offers us in this way is not a general theory of the derivability of the constitutive properties of finite things from those of the infinite being. Such a general, top-down theory of the constitution of the properties of things will be part of the philosophies of Spinoza and Leibniz, but it is blocked in Descartes’s philosophy by the thesis that some of the limited perfections of finite things are not present in God formally, but only eminently.

It is clear that this restriction is motivated at least partly by Descartes’s commitment to the incorporeality of God. Corporeality, he says, is not to be ascribed to God because it implies divisibility, which is

⁷ AT V 356, cited by Stephen Menn, *Descartes and Augustine* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), pp. 284–5. My translation largely agrees with Menn’s.

an imperfection (AT VII 138). Extension, which for Descartes is the essence of body, and the ground of its divisibility, must be denied of God for the same reason. All this is reflected in his saying,

We also recognise that among several unlimited particulars of which we have the ideas, such as unlimited or infinite knowledge; likewise infinite power, number, length, etc.; there are some, such as knowledge and power, that are contained formally in the idea that we have of God, and others, such as number and length, that are in it only eminently. (AT VII 137)

In this statement Descartes speaks of properties contained formally or eminently in the *idea* of God; but our best guide to understanding the distinction is probably his most explicit definition of it, in a closely linked text, as applied to containment in *objects* of ideas:

The same things are said to be in the objects of our ideas *formally* when they are of the same sort in the objects as we perceive them to be; and *eminently* when they are not really of the same sort but are so great that they can fill the role of such things.⁸

Putting these texts together, we may plausibly ascribe to Descartes the following view. Unlimited being, knowledge and power are contained in the idea of God (and indeed in God) in a way that corresponds exactly to our perception of them. These unlimited divine attributes are also constituents, and indeed the positive content, of our ideas of limited being, knowledge and power, which add to them nothing but limits. No divine perfection, however, stands in that relationship to extension, or its modes, such as length. What there is in God that corresponds to their limited perfections is something (a being and a power) that is great enough and perfect enough to fill a certain role, which I think must be that of *causing* those limited perfections and our ideas of them; but it does not contain any of the specific positive content that distinguishes extension from other attributes. Extension cannot be constructed from an attribute of God as limited knowledge, power and being can be constructed from their unlimited counterparts.

⁸ AT VII 161. The Latin of this passage requires a somewhat free translation; I have been guided in mine partly by the authorised French translation that appeared in Descartes's lifetime (AT IX 125).

Concluding this discussion of Descartes I'll mention three problems about his position. The first arises from the fact that he says that no attributes belong univocally to God and to us. The reason for this, as for many similar claims in the Middle Ages, is not simply God's transcendent greatness, but a doctrine of divine simplicity according to which no attributes are really distinct from each other in God, as they typically are in us. How this denial of univocity is supposed to be consistent (as Descartes must have supposed it to be) with the claim that some attributes of finite things are contained formally (though without their limits) in the idea of God is a question I shall not address here.

A central feature of Descartes's view, as I have sketched it, is the thesis that infinite being, and I suppose also infinite knowledge (omniscience) and infinite power (omnipotence) *are* being, knowledge and power as such, the objects of the general ideas of being, knowledge and power. A second problem for Descartes is whether that thesis is correct, or even plausible. I doubt that we can glean much satisfying argument about it from him, but I will return to pretty much the same question in connection with Leibniz.

In the third place, there is at least the appearance of a problem here for Descartes's dualism. It seems the positive content that constitutes the formal and objective reality (or thinghood) of body cannot be derived from the divine attributes as that which constitutes the formal and objective reality of mind can. There is thus a fundamental ontological disparity between them. It is noteworthy that Spinoza and Leibniz, who emphasise the derivability of the properties of the finite from those of the infinite, abandon one or another of Descartes's views that seem to clash at this point. Spinoza allows extension and thought to be in God in the same way, and Leibniz does not allow extension to constitute a substance or thing in itself at all.

Spinoza

I read Spinoza as a strong, but atypical, and highly original, exponent of a top-down treatment of the relation between the attributes of infinite and finite beings. Descartes was of course not the first to offer a top-down

treatment of that relation. The archetypal top-down treatment in Western philosophy is Plato's, and it is echoed in much of philosophical theology from late antiquity through the Middle Ages. Of the relations suggested by Plato as obtaining between ordinary particulars and the Forms, the one most used in structuring philosophical theologies has been that of an imitation or imperfect copy to an archetype or exemplar; and something like that is envisaged in Descartes's top-down approach. In Spinoza's conception of how the properties of God are prior to the properties of finite things, the exemplar/imitation relation is replaced by the substance/mode relation (borrowed, after a fashion, from another aspect of Descartes's philosophy).

At the centre of Spinoza's conception of the relation of finite things to God is what we may call the relation of *modification*, the relation of modes, not only to substance, but also to attributes. For Spinoza a mode of an attribute is no longer merely a *way* of having that attribute, for the classification of properties of finite things as modes in that sense does not obviously have the monistic implications of Spinoza's conception of the mode/attribute relation. It is tempting to say that for Spinoza finite modes of extension and of thought are modifications that constitute *parts* of the infinite systems that are concretely and respectively the divine extension and thought; and certainly one important feature of the relationship for Spinoza is that each finite mode is included in the divine substance, under its attribute, along with infinitely more that is not included in that finite mode. The finite modes are related to the substance as incomplete to complete. They are partial expressions of the divine attributes.

However, Spinoza famously denies that God has parts. The denial is thought out in terms of a rather specialised conception of parthood, defined by the criterion that 'A thing composed of different parts must be such that each singular part can be conceived and understood without the others' — and could indeed, at least intelligibly, exist without the others.⁹ Indeed, Spinoza's argument that extended substance does not satisfy this criterion for having parts provides one way of understanding, at least

⁹ *Opera* I 24–5 (*Short Treatise*, I, ii). (For an explanation of references to the works of Spinoza in this form, see Abbreviations, p. ix.) I quote from Curley's translation of the *Short Treatise*.

with respect to the attribute of extension, how the infinite is prior to the finite. Accepting Descartes's argument that extension's role as essence of a substance excludes the possibility of a vacuum or empty space, Spinoza argues that therefore it is impossible for one part of an extended substance to 'be annihilated, the rest remaining connected with one another as before', and hence that the supposed parts of extended substance satisfy neither his criterion of parthood nor the traditional criterion of real distinctness (*Opera* II 59: *Ethics* IP15S). In this way the whole is prior to the supposed parts, or more fundamental than they are. They cannot be anything at all except as they have a place in the system that constitutes the complete extended substance.

Similarly, in the attribute of thought, Spinoza regards the finite modes, such as our minds, as essentially fragments of the infinite intellect of God, and none of them can be completely understood without understanding the whole system. Spinoza even says that 'the human mind is a part of the infinite intellect of God' (*Opera* II 94: *Ethics* IIP11C). That infinite intellect is not, for Spinoza, the thinking substance, but an infinite mode thereof. His view seems to be that the finite mode is a part, not of the infinite substance as such, but rather of the whole (infinite) way in which the substance is modified under one of its attributes.

Underlining the part/whole relation between the human and divine intellects, Martial Gueroult rightly makes the point that the difference between them is quantitative rather than qualitative.

My intellect is not an *effect*, but a *part*, of the divine intellect . . . Thanks to that commensurability [between the part and the whole], God's knowledge, that is, the truth, differs from man's knowledge, not in *nature*, but only in *quantity*.¹⁰

Thus thought and extension are predicated univocally of finite things and God. What they *are* is the same in finite things as it is in God, or at least in the infinite and eternal modes of God.¹¹ The difference is just that the

¹⁰ Martial Gueroult, *Spinoza*, vol. I: *Dieu (Éthique, I)* (Paris: Aubier-Montaigne, 1968), p. 404.

¹¹ Spinoza says that 'God's intellect, in so far as it is conceived to constitute the divine essence, differs from our intellect both as to its essence and as to its existence, and

thought or the extension that is in a finite thing does not contain the complete system of thinking or extended being that is in God.

Spinoza does not apply this schema of relations between finite and infinite to all the attributes traditionally attributed to God, but only to thought and extension, among attributes of which we have any conception. In his early *Short Treatise*, Spinoza says that '*existing of itself, being the cause of all things, the greatest good, eternal, and immutable, etc.*' do indeed belong to God as '*propria*' of God, but are not 'attributes' of God. As *propria* they belong to God alone, and Spinoza is not committed to finite things' having properties of the same nature with them.

He is arguing here against scholastic philosophers who held 'that God cannot be defined because the definition must represent the thing absolutely and affirmatively, and in their view one cannot know God affirmatively, but only negatively'; and doubtless Spinoza regards extension and thought as attributes that have positive content. So it is tempting to suppose that Spinoza's reason for regarding the mentioned properties as non-attributes is that they are negative. But I have not found that he says exactly that, and in fact not all of them are clearly negative. Existing of itself and causing all things do not seem purely negative, and similar questions could be raised about unity and infinity, mentioned by Spinoza in a note. What seems common to all the properties classified here as *propria* but not attributes of God is something harder to sum up in a word. They are relative, structural, formal, or in some cases negative properties. Spinoza's central point about them is probably best expressed by him when he says that the mentioned non-attributes are 'only *Propria*, which indeed belong to a thing, but never explain what it is . . . [T]hrough those *propria* we can know neither what the being to which these *propria* belong is, nor what attributes it has.' In Aristotelian terms, they do not answer the question, 'What is it?' which must be answered by whatever

cannot agree with it in anything except in name' (*Opera*, II 63: *Ethics* IP17S, emphasis mine). I am indebted to Michael Della Rocca for pointing out to me that Spinoza does *not* make a similar denial regarding the divine intellect conceived as an infinite and eternal *mode* of God; this is a correction of Robert Merrihew Adams, *Leibniz: Determinist, Theist, Idealist* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1994), pp. 21 and 125–6.

attributes constitute a thing as a substance — a question to which Spinoza believes that the Cartesian attributes of thought and extension provide the only answers known to us.¹²

Leibniz

Unlike Spinoza (and Descartes), the mature Leibniz does not think that extension can explain what a thing that has it is. By the 1690s we find him arguing that extension cannot be, as Descartes held, the essence of a substance because it is only a structure of relations, ‘a repetition or continuous multiplicity of that which is spread out . . . and consequently it does not suffice to explain the very nature of the substance that is spread out or repeated, whose notion is prior to that of its repetition’.¹³ Although Leibniz does not make the theological link explicit, this argument clears a way for holding that extension is not a divine attribute¹⁴ while also maintaining a general top-down theory of the constitution of the properties of things.

In such a theory Leibniz too is concerned with properties viewed as able to explain what the thing *is* that has them. In terminology that is used by all the philosophers we are discussing, we are concerned with properties that can constitute the *reality* of a thing. To say that a thing has reality, in the sense that concerns us here, is not to say only that there is such a thing, and does not always imply that it actually exists. ‘Reality’,

¹² The source of all the quotations and citations in this paragraph and the one preceding it is Spinoza, *Opera* I 44–5 (*Short Treatise* I vii); I quote from Curley’s translation of the *Short Treatise*. The passage receives an illuminating discussion in Alan Donagan, ‘Spinoza’s Theology’, in Don Garrett (ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to Spinoza* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), pp. 343–82 (in particular, pp. 346–8).

¹³ G IV, 467/W 104 (published January 1693). A similar argument is found in G IV, 364f./L 390 (1692 or earlier), in G II, 169f., 183/L 516, 519 (1699), in G IV, 589 (1702), in G VI, 584, and in several other texts. (For an explanation of references to the works of Leibniz in this form, see Abbreviations, p. ix.)

¹⁴ By his last years Leibniz seems not to ascribe to God any attribute that is a version of extension or spatiality. Even immensity, the divine attribute he associates most closely with space, appears to be no more than an aspect of the divine omnipotence. But this is by no means so clear in Leibniz’s early writings. For a sketch of the development of his views on the subject, see Adams, *Leibniz*, pp. 123–4.

or in Latin *realitas*, is an abstract noun formed from the noun *res* or 'thing' in such a way that it can mean *thingishness* or *thinghood*. We are concerned here with what is required to constitute something as a *thing*.

This opens the door to speaking, as all of our authors do, of things having more and less reality. The question, 'Is there such a thing?' seems to require the answer 'Yes' or 'No' — not 'More', and not 'Less'. But things may be more and less richly endowed with thingishness, if what constitute them as things are properties or attributes that vary in degree or may be possessed more or less completely or perfectly, as all of our authors suppose.

This supposition is closely connected with doctrines of the priority of the infinite. In the Third Meditation, for example, it is from his understanding 'that there is more reality in infinite than in finite substance' that Descartes infers that 'the perception of the infinite is in some way prior in me to that of the finite'. And, as we see in the same text, having 'more reality' is something that goes beyond any mere 'negation of the finite' (AT VII 45). It is something positive and, in Spinoza's terms, it explains *what* the thing that has it *is*.

It is in terms of this conception of 'reality' that we must understand Leibniz when he says that 'all the reality of creatures is in God'.¹⁵ He is saying that the positive content of the properties that constitute the thingishness of finite things is somehow in God. I don't think this can mean a connection as loose as the 'eminent' containment allowed by Descartes. For Leibniz proposes, as Descartes does not, a *general* top-down theory of the *constitution* (and not just the causation) of the constitutive properties, or *realities*, of finite things as deriving their positive content from those of the infinite being, a theory that I think entails more commonality of nature between finite and infinite than Descartes requires.

At the same time Leibniz must affirm less sameness of nature between the attributes of finite and infinite beings than Spinoza affirms, if he is to distance himself from Spinoza's pantheism, in which a divine attribute actualises itself in a system of which finite things are fragments. To be sure, there are relatively early texts, from his Paris period, in which

¹⁵ A VI, iv, 990. (For an explanation, see Abbreviations, p. ix.)

Leibniz seems at least tempted by a view similar to Spinoza's.¹⁶ From 1678 on, however, he clearly rejects pantheism, insisting in the end on a difference in nature between God and finite things, or creatures: 'the reality of creatures', he says, 'is not that same absolute reality that is in God, but a limited reality, for that is of the essence of a creature'.¹⁷ Lacking perfections essential to God, and possessing limited or imperfect properties that do not characterise God, creatures must therefore be distinct from God by what is often called 'Leibniz's Law' of the numerical difference of things that are qualitatively different.

How can Leibniz maintain both the commonality of nature and the difference of nature that he requires? Leibniz's top-down approach to the relation between the attributes of the finite and the infinite is articulated in his conception of God as the *ens perfectissimum*, the most perfect being, 'a subject of all perfections'.¹⁸ As this formulation suggests, Leibniz, unlike Descartes, speaks without embarrassment of God as having a plurality of distinct properties. He maintains that God is simple, but in the same sense in which all the monads or fundamental substances of his system are simple — that is, in the sense of having no parts that are or could be substances.¹⁹ Properties, distinct from each other as they may be,

¹⁶ These are discussed at length in Adams, *Leibniz*, pp. 123–30.

¹⁷ A VI, iv, 990, correcting the translation given in Adams, *Leibniz*, p. 133. The development of Leibniz's thought on these points is traced much more fully in *ibid.*, pp. 123–34.

¹⁸ A VI, iii, 579/L 167.

¹⁹ For the plurality of properties in God, see A VI, iii, 519–21, Gr 557; for a possible hesitation about it, see G I, 140 = A VI, iv, 1766 (probably of 1678). For the assimilation of God's simplicity to that of finite monads, see Gr 557, G VI, 576. (For an explanation, see Abbreviations, p. ix.) For a comprehensive discussion of divine simplicity in Leibniz, see Gaston Grua, *Jurisprudence universelle et théodicée selon Leibniz* (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1953), pp. 274–88. Grua seems a bit scandalised by Leibniz's apparent acceptance of a real plurality of attributes in God, and sees in Leibniz more evidence than I do of hesitation about it. Leibniz may have been an innovator on this point, as Grua (*ibid.*, p. 274) suggests that he was on the related identification of the elements of creaturely properties, 'except for their limitations, with the attributes or perfections of God'. The modified version of divine simplicity is seen in full explicitness in the mid-eighteenth century in the broadly Leibnizian *Metaphysica* of Alexander Gottlieb Baumgarten (7th edn., Halle: Hemmerde, 1779; reprint Hildesheim: Georg Olms, 1963), which Kant used year after year as a textbook for his lectures on metaphysics. Baumgarten holds that 'there is . . . in the most perfect being a certain absolutely necessary plurality' (§803). And 'given the supreme simplicity of God, his being com-

do not count for Leibniz as parts that could disturb the simplicity of a substance.

But what is a perfection? 'A *perfection*', Leibniz says, 'is what I call every simple quality that is positive and absolute', where an absolute quality is one 'that expresses without any limits whatever it expresses' (A VI, iii, 578/L 167). Properties that are to be perfections, according to this definition, must satisfy four conditions.²⁰ (1) They must be qualities rather than, say, relations. (2) They must be simple. (3) They must be positive — metaphysically and not just verbally. And (4) they must be absolute; that is, they must express or possess their content, their reality, 'without any limits'.

Absoluteness is an intensification of positiveness, for limitation is conceived here as partial negation; and it is the most constant feature of Leibniz's conception of perfections that they are so purely positive as to involve no negation at all²¹ — by which I assume is meant, no limitation of their possession or expression of their positive qualitative content.

Simplicity, as a property of perfections, is not essential to Leibniz's version of the ontological argument for the existence of God,²² and is therefore omitted from some of his definitions of a perfection.²³ Simple properties play a crucial role, however, in his top-down understanding of the constitution of the properties of things. Leibniz is as insistent as Descartes that the perfect, the unlimited, the 'absolute', is conceptually prior to the imperfect. He tries to combine this with the characteristically though not exclusively modern penchant for trying to understand the

posed in any way of parts outside of parts is indeed excluded, but a most real diversity of a plurality in God is not excluded, since even in finite things it is false that all things really diverse are set outside each other' (§838).

²⁰ For a fuller discussion of the interpretation of this definition, see Adams, *Leibniz*, pp. 113–19.

²¹ See his *Monadology*, §§41, 45.

²² See Adams, *Leibniz*, pp. 145–6.

²³ As when he says in his *Theodicy* (1710) that 'every reality that is purely positive or absolute is a perfection' [G VI, 383/p. 54 in the English translation by E. M. Huggard (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1951)]. A similar definition is in A VI, iv, 556 (probably of 1683–5); cf. Donald Rutherford, *Leibniz and the Rational Order of Nature* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), p. 24.

complex in terms of the simple — and, indeed, with a sort of atomism about concepts, though not about physical objects. This is signalled when he says that ‘the absolute concept is always prior to, and simpler than, the limited’.²⁴

It is important both to Leibniz’s metaphysics and to his philosophy of logic that he thinks of all properties or concepts as either simple or constructed from simple predicates by logical operations such as conjunction and negation. Even though positive predicates don’t have to be simple, all the simple predicates are positive. For since negation is a logical operation rather than a predicate with non-logical content, the absolutely simple predicates, which are not constructed by any logical operation, will not involve any negation, and will thus be absolutely positive. All simple qualities will therefore be perfections by Leibniz’s definition; and Leibniz seems in fact to have believed that all the simple predicates, of which all other predicates are ultimately composed, are among the attributes of God, even if he sometimes counts conjunctions of such simple predicates, without any negation or limitation, as divine perfections too. On this view, the less than perfect properties of finite things must all be composed, by logical operations including various degrees of limitation or partial negation, from the simple perfections of God. That, I take it, is the structure of Leibniz’s most articulated top-down conception of the constitution of the properties of things.

I wish to explore here two issues about it. First, can the positive qualities of finite things in fact be constructed, in a way that fits Leibniz’s strategy, as limited degrees of positive qualities that in God are absolute or unlimited? Second, how plausible is it to identify the simple qualities (if there are any) with the divine perfections?

Constructing the Positive Qualities of the Finite

In evaluating the success of Leibniz’s top-down construction of positive qualities of creatures as limited degrees of absolute attributes of God, let’s begin with an example both Descartes and Leibniz would like: pure

²⁴ Leibniz, A VI, iv, 2314 (the Academy editors argue for a date of about 1685); cf. A VI, iii, 502 (1676) and A VI, vi, 157f. (in Leibniz’s *New Essays Concerning Human Understanding*, c. 1704).

primordial power, considered both as omnipotence and as a simple, purely positive quality. It is questionable whether any power can be both omnipotence and a simple, purely positive quality; but let's postpone worrying about that objection.

In logical construction Leibniz often gives the impression of wanting to use only truth-functional logical operators — particularly negation and conjunction. Strict adherence to this austere aspiration would leave him with a stark choice between two alternatives regarding the relation between the powers of finite things and the simple, purely positive, and therefore perfect power of God from which (on Leibniz's view) they are constructed: either the finite things have that same perfect power that God has, or they have the negation of it. Neither alternative is attractive. If the finite things have the negation of the primordial divine power, it is hard to see what property they can have that is constructed from that power by negation and conjunction except absolute powerlessness. But they are not supposed to be absolutely powerless. On the other hand, if they have that very property that is pure primordial power, unmodified by negation, then it seems they have one of the perfect attributes of God, even if it is conjoined in them with negation of other perfections. But finite things are not supposed to have any of those perfect attributes.

There is some indication that Leibniz would not in fact restrict himself rigorously to truth-functional constructions.²⁵ And surely neither of the two alternatives offered by such a construction for the limitation of divine perfections in creatures accords with Leibniz's intentions. Limitation, I have suggested, is partial negation; and *partial* negation is exactly what is wanted here. On a Leibnizian account the perfection of power should be partly denied and partly affirmed of finite things. But how can an absolutely *simple* property be partly denied of anything? What part of it is to be denied, and what part affirmed, given that it has no parts at all? If a simple property is to be affirmed or denied of something, it would seem that it must be affirmed or denied as a whole. But can a property be partly affirmed or denied as a whole?

Perhaps it can. Perhaps indeed we routinely do that with *compara-*

²⁵ See C 358–9, where Leibniz seems to accept non-truth-functional constructions employing 'particles' such as 'in'.

tives. If I say that pineapples taste sweeter than bananas, though both are sweet, I do not imply that there is some *part* of (phenomenal) sweetness that is present in the experienced flavour of pineapples but missing from that of bananas. I can and do say that bananas are *less* sweet than pineapples without presupposing any analysis of sweetness into parts. ‘Less sweet’ functions here as a partial negation, one which implies ‘not as sweet as the comparison case’ but does not imply ‘not sweet at all’. This comparative sort of partial negation is not a truth-functional connective, but in another way it seems to be exactly what we are looking for. After all, the relation of finite things to God with respect to power is precisely that they are *less powerful* than God.

How would a comparative construction work for Leibniz? Suppose God has the pure and simple perfection of power (= **P**). Suppose further that there is a creature that is one-billionth as powerful as God, and thus has the one-billionth degree of **P**. There is a fairly obvious theological objection to this way of beginning a construction. God’s power and knowledge are commonly thought to be *immeasurably* greater and more perfect than any creature’s. Is it theologically acceptable to suppose that any creature’s power or knowledge is one-billionth as great and perfect as God’s? —or one over ten to the *n*th for any value of *n*? This might seem to be merely a problem about a particular device of presentation; but I rather doubt that any comparative construction that would be sufficient to determine a property of a finite thing would be theologically acceptable if the one I have begun to sketch is not. Here I won’t dwell on this theological objection, however, because my present project has to do rather broadly with philosophical availability and unavailability of constructions.

If we suppose, then, that some finite being has power one-billionth as great as pure and simple **P**, a Leibnizian may construe this creature’s property of power as a complex property whose constituents are: **P**, and the limiting or partly negative property-forming operator *the one-billionth degree of*. The possessor of this property does *not possess* **P**. For one thing, the degree-possessing is a complex property, and **P** is a simple property. Leibniz does not think finite beings possess any simple property, for he thinks all the simple properties are perfections possessed only by God. Perhaps it would be more accurate, therefore, to avoid

speaking of creatures as possessing ‘degrees of **P**’, and speak only of ‘degrees of approximation to **P**’. Let ‘degrees of **P**’, in what follows, be understood as an abbreviation of the latter, more accurate expression.

We may well be tempted by the following objection to this construction. It may work as a construction of the *relational* (and specifically, *comparative*) property of being one-billionth as powerful as a perfectly powerful being (provided there are no insuperable problems about a cardinal measure of degrees of power). But it may be thought that such a positive comparative property can only supervene on non-comparative properties which, if not simple, do have positive constituents that are not comparative and that the possessor of the comparative property must possess — whereas in the construction proposed above for Leibniz, there is no provision for a positive, non-comparative property to be possessed by the creature as part of the basis for its possessing the positive comparative property.

That’s just the way it is with scalar magnitudes, a Leibnizian may reply; they don’t have to supervene on non-comparative properties in the way that the objector claims. Some properties of finite things vary, primitively, in intensity or strength. Their variant forms just are degrees of scalar magnitudes of qualities that in their unqualified or absolute form are attributes of God. Just as it may seem that one light or shade of colour is brighter than another, and that this difference does not supervene on any more fundamental qualitative difference, so in fact a creature’s degree of power, or of distinctness of perception, just is an inferior degree of the absolute power or knowledge that belongs to God — and the degree of the power or knowledge does not supervene on any more fundamental positive features of it.

This Leibnizian response is clarifying in a way. There are scalar magnitudes — for instance, length and velocity. It is not obvious that particular magnitudes within such a scale must supervene on any more fundamental feature of their possessor. But length and velocity are quantities rather than qualities in traditional Aristotelian terms; and for Leibniz, at least in his maturity, they are relational rather than directly qualitative features of things. There are properties normally and naturally counted as qualitative that we speak of as if they were scalar magnitudes in that way; (phenomenal) brightness is a good example of

that. But I think it is far from obvious that anything can have a degree of (phenomenal) brightness that is not determined by positive qualities on which it supervenes, qualities which are not just degrees of a scalar magnitude.

That comparative degrees must supervene on non-comparative positive qualities is a point that I think applies to phenomenal qualities in general, and not just to brightness. I doubt that a particular shade of purplish red, for example, can be constructed as the property of being so many degrees (perhaps 217 thousandths) of the way from pure red to pure blue—even if there is a pure red and pure blue, and a cardinal measure of degrees along the spectrum between them, which may also be doubted. Knowing the pure red and the pure blue, and that the shade in question is 217 thousandths of the way from the former to the latter, will I be able to know what that shade of purplish red looks like? I think not. Knowing how it is related, by likeness and unlikeness, to other shades of colour is one thing; knowing what it looks like is another. And what it looks like *is* the shade of phenomenal colour. I think the project of constructing a particular phenomenal quality from relations of similarity or degree or partial negation to supposed ‘pure’ phenomenal qualities is probably doomed to failure because it involves substituting largely structural content for purely qualitative content, and the positive, purely qualitative content cannot be given in that way. And that may be a problem for comparative constructions of positive qualities in general.

Remarkably, Leibniz seems to embrace a somewhat similar conclusion on the basis of similar examples in one of his papers from 1676, saying

There are infinitely many simple forms, because our perceptions are infinitely many and cannot be explained from each other, as from the knowledge of perception and extension alone it is impossible to explain what we sense in the red, the luminous, or the hot.²⁶

In his maturity, however, Leibniz would not be concerned to refute what I have said about phenomenal qualities as such; for he regarded them as

²⁶ A VI, iii, 521.

complex rather than simple,²⁷ on the ground that they must be constituted by structures isomorphic with those of physical states that we perceive by means of them, though we are not normally conscious of this because our perceptions of them are confused. Leibniz's theory of universal harmony requires this mutual structural expression. So in his final view phenomenal qualities are less acceptable than knowledge and power as examples of relatively fundamental properties of things.

But a focus on knowledge and power hardly gives us a construction of positive properties of finite things as comparative properties that do not supervene on non-comparative properties. For it is not plausible to think of either the knowledge or the power possessed by a creature as just a degree of a scalar magnitude. It may *have* a degree of a scalar magnitude of knowledge or power; but that is just the point I have already granted to Leibniz, that a *comparative* property of degree of power (or knowledge) relative to the absolute divine power (or knowledge) may be constructible in the way I have suggested on his behalf. Comparative properties commonly supervene on non-comparative properties, however. And it seems that degrees of knowledge and power do supervene on facts — quite complex and not obviously comparative facts — about what their possessor knows and can do, and how.

Simple Qualities and Divine Perfections

The point just noted, about degrees of knowledge and power, and the complexity involved in them, connects with our remaining major question about the plausibility of identifying the simple qualities (if there are any) with the divine perfections. Doubts can arise about several points in the role that Leibniz assigns to the attributes of God. To what extent are they really *qualities*, as distinct from, say, relations? Don't such attributes as omniscience and omnipotence have a relational aspect, with regard to what is known and what can be brought about? And are

²⁷ In an important paper of 1686 (C 360) colours are among 'confused phenomena of the sense' that can be considered as '*primitive simple Terms*, or those to be assumed for them in the meantime', but in the context this pretty clearly means only that it is reasonable for us to leave them unanalysed, in scientific work, because the confusion of our perceptions leaves us unable to analyse them into anything simpler.

they *purely positive*? Doesn't omniscience involve negation, at least in the structure of its object, 'since even the imperfections or limitations of things are represented in the divine intellect', as Leibniz himself says? How plausible is it to suppose that an omniscient being can represent the negative just by representing the positive, as Leibniz seems to go on to suggest (Gr 355)? These questions deserve investigation, but here I want to focus on the question whether divine attributes, such as omniscience and omnipotence, are *simple*. For the top-down strategy of Leibniz's theory of the constitution of properties relies on a structure in which simple properties are the fundamental building blocks and are identified with divine perfections.

However, there is reason to doubt the simplicity of the divine perfections that are most salient for Leibniz and for theological and philosophical tradition. For example, *omniscience* does not seem to be simple. It seems rather to be analysable as knowing everything. If knowing is a simple property at all, it would seem to be a property indefinite as to the quantity of what is known. And omniscience (that is, knowing *everything*) seems to be a special case of it—a complex property constructed by further specification from the more general and simpler property of knowing as such. That construction is more plausible (at least on first reflection) than the one in which the property of knowing everything is identified with knowing as such, and properties of knowing less are constructed from it by limitation. And of course the literature of epistemology is rich in proposed analyses of knowing which suggest that it is not a simple property at all. Even if we are not satisfied with any complete conceptual analysis of it, we may think that knowledge must necessarily have complex structural and relational features that may lead us to doubt that it is thoroughly simple.

I do not think the mature Leibniz would insist on the simplicity of omniscience, or of perfect knowledge. As I have noted above, simplicity is not as essential as pure positiveness to his conception of a perfection. And by the beginning of his middle years he was denying that human analysis is capable of reaching concepts which are 'primitive' or 'conceived through themselves' (C 514). I take this to imply that we do not know that knowledge, in its divine form, or any other attribute that we conceive to be divine, is simple, since a simple attribute would be

primitive and conceived through itself. Does this mean that Leibniz has no problem regarding the possible complexity of omniscience or perfect knowledge?

It does not imply, at any rate, that there is no problem here for his project of a top-down understanding of the properties of finite things as constructed from simple divine attributes. Let's consider two ways in which Leibniz might try to make that project compatible with his acknowledgement that we cannot identify any attribute as truly simple. I think we will find that each way may sustain a part of the project, but they do not together sustain quite the whole project.

First, so far as I can see, Leibniz never ceased to believe that all simple properties are properties of God. In the same text from which I have quoted the claim that our analysis cannot reach primitive or simple concepts, he says that God is the only thing of which a primitive concept can be a concept. It's just that 'we do not understand distinctly enough how the natures of things flow from God, nor how the ideas of things flow from the idea of God' (C 513). So why can't he continue to maintain that all the properties of finite things are in fact constructed from simple properties that belong to God and not to the finite things, even though we don't know how, nor from what properties?

The problem is that in ignorance of those things, we are given too little reason to believe that Leibniz's account of the construction is correct. Not knowing what the simple properties are, we have little reason to believe either that they are of transcendent perfection or that finite things do not possess them too. The following is one way in which simple properties might be possessed by finite beings, and not be of transcendent perfection, and yet all be in God. Finite substances, or monads, in Leibniz's final view of things are all perceiving substances; and in the last analysis there is nothing in them but perception and appetite (G II, 270/L 537), with perceptions as the sole occurrent qualities, and appetites as dispositions to perceive. If their properties are at least partly constructed from simple properties that they themselves possess, those will all be properties pertaining to perception — for instance, properties of having perceptions of a certain qualitative character. If God is a perceiving being, and omniscient, God may be presumed to have perceptions of every possible simple qualitative character, so as to understand perfectly

all possibilities. And if that is so, other things Leibniz believes suggest that the eternal possibility of finite things having perceptions of those simple qualitative characters depends on God's necessarily and eternally having perceptions of those qualities.²⁸ Thus we may get the Leibnizian and Kantian thesis that all the positive qualitative content of all possible properties of creatures is found in God.

This is not a top-down account, however, because it does not explain properties of finite things in terms of *more perfect* properties of the infinite. In this account, rather, *the same* simple properties that are present in finite things are present also in God. This will still leave more than enough difference between God and the finite being to ground the numerical distinction between them as substances. For in God, we may suppose, there are vastly more of the simple properties than in any creature, and they occur in an immeasurably richer context. One by one, however, the simple properties themselves, which God shares with creatures, will hardly be of transcendent perfection.

The other line Leibniz might take may yield a top-down understanding of some, but not all, properties of finite things. It abandons the focus on simple qualities. We may therefore return to perfect knowledge as an example, without worrying now about whether it is simple. We may even return to the thought that it is not knowledge in general, without regard to its degree of perfection, but perfect knowledge that is the primitive case or form of knowledge. Only this will not now be grounded in claims about simplicity. Rather we will focus on ways in which human claims to knowledge are rendered unclear or uncertain by the imperfections of our cognitive condition. Intuitively, knowledge is supposed to be certain, justified, reliable, and produced in a non-defective way. Notoriously, however, the satisfaction of these requirements by any human cognition can be doubted. Many philosophers, perhaps most, insist none the less that we do know things; but our epistemological perplexities may lend some plausibility to the idea that what we call knowledge in our own case is only an approximation to a more perfect cognitive state that would fully be knowledge. They may even suggest the thought that we are not

²⁸ For reasoning tending to such a conclusion, see Robert M. Adams, 'God, Possibility, and Kant', in *Faith and Philosophy*, 17 (2000), 425–40.

in a position to understand what ‘full-fledged’ knowledge would be, but that one who had divinely perfect knowledge would understand it, and would understand better than we do in what ways we do and do not know.

An example may bring out the appeal of these thoughts. We ascribe beliefs and purposes to dogs. We do this by using as models beliefs and purposes that humans have, but that dogs could not have in the form in which they occur in the models. And surely we understand the dogs’ thought better than we could if (*per impossibile*) we allowed in our minds only the sort of beliefs and purposes that dogs have. In this way we understand the dogs’ thought better than dogs can. And we do it by using as a model our own more perfect consciousness — more perfect in the sense that it is more complete, including more complete instances of belief and purpose. Couldn’t something similar be true of the relation of God’s perfect knowledge to what counts as knowledge in us?

What is proposed here is a top-down account of the nature of knowledge, in which the perfect case is the primary case. The primary case is not omniscience as such. It may imply omniscience; but what is seen as archetypal in this line of thought is not how much God knows, but how God knows. And the primary case not only need not be simple, but is not viewed as a constituent from which less perfect cases are constructed, but rather as an archetype which they imperfectly resemble. The idea of a top-down account in which the key relationship is the more or less holistic one of resembling, rather than the more analytical one of being constructed out of, resonates with a long succession of texts of at least broadly Platonic origin, including some from medieval philosophical theologians.²⁹ Perhaps it is not unreasonable to see this idea also in section 48 of the *Monadology*, where Leibniz says that to the extent that they have perfection in them, attributes of created monads ‘are nothing but imitations’ of divine attributes.

This is, as I said, a top-down account only of *some* properties of finite

²⁹ For a particularly interesting example, see S. Bonaventura, *Commentaria in quatuor libros sententiarum Magistri Petri Lombardi*, lib. I, dist. 35, art. unicus, qu. 1, in his *Opera omnia*, ed. patres Collegii a S. Bonaventura, vol. I (Quaracchi: Typographia Collegii S. Bonaventurae, 1882), pp. 600–602; quoted, in part, in Marion, *La théologie blanche de Descartes*, p. 37. Marion’s own comments about exemplarism in medieval and seventeenth-century philosophy are interesting (*ibid.*, pp. 37–50).

beings. The imperfect resemblance that our cognitive state may have to perfect or unqualified knowledge doubtless supervenes on other properties of our cognitive state; and nothing said here gives reason to deny that our state possesses those other properties precisely and completely. What gets a top-down account here is not how we possess any cognitive properties at all, but how those we possess may count as knowledge, albeit imperfect knowledge.

More generally, this sort of top-down account would be an account of *perfections*, explaining how finite things may be excellent or rich in some respect, in some degree, by their resemblance to the way in which an infinite being would be perfectly excellent or rich in that respect. Along these lines there might be top-down accounts of metaphysical perfections, such as substancehood, and of epistemological perfections, such as knowledge and understanding, as well as of moral and aesthetic perfections. None the less it remains plausible to suppose that the limited perfection of finite things always supervenes on other properties that cannot be constructed simply as incomplete or diminished likeness to transcendent perfections.

We could combine this line of thought with the other that I suggested for Leibniz, according to which simple properties from which a complete basis for all the properties of finite things may be constructed are also present in God, though they may not be transcendent perfections. The two lines of thought are compatible with each other. But the combination of them will not give Leibniz a top-down account of all properties, for the one is not a top-down account and the other does not apply to all properties, but only to perfections as such.

Note. Some of the material of this essay derives from the fourth of the Gifford Lectures on 'God and Being' that I gave at the University of St Andrews in November 1999, although that lecture had a less historical, more constructive focus.