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**Primary matter, primitive passive power, and creaturely limitation in Leibniz**[[1]](#footnote-1)

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At the end of his illuminating discussion of Leibniz’s notion of primary matter, Robert Merrihew Adams raises a “subtle question” to which, he suspects, “Leibniz himself did not attend carefully.” The question is: “Is primary matter a positive constituent of a substance, something which must be *added* to a substantial form to constitute a complete substance? Or is it simply the set of limitations characteristic of a particular substantial form, and thus merely the expression of something that has *not* been added to (or included in) the form?”[[2]](#footnote-2)

 In this paper I will argue that Leibniz’s considerate answer in his mature metaphysics would be that primary matter is *not* a positive constituent which must be added to the form in order to have a substance. Primary matter is merely a way to express the negation of some further perfection. It does not have a positive ontological status and merely indicates the limitation or imperfection of a substance. To be sure, Leibniz is less than explicit on this point, and in many texts he writes as if primary matter were a positive constituent of a substance. It seems to me, however, that the view most in keeping with the thrust of his mature philosophical system is that captured by a striking remark of 1695: “Materia rerum est nihilum: id est limitatio [The matter of things is nothing: that is, limitation].”[[3]](#footnote-3) This becomes especially apparent in texts showing that Leibniz’s conception of primary matter corresponds to his conception of creaturely limitation*.*

I will start by discussing the notion of primary matter in the scholastic tradition. I will then show that although Leibniz places the scholastic terminology of primary matter at a crucial juncture of his metaphysics, he thinks of primary matter in a way which significantly deviates from earlier scholastic views. This is typical of Leibniz’s *modus operandi* and of his use of scholastic doctrines. I will conclude that despite his adoption of distinctive terminology of Aristotelian scholasticism, instead of holding a broadly Aristotelian concept of primary matter as the ultimate subject of inherence, Leibniz thinks of primary matter according to a Neoplatonic (or more precisely Plotinian) blue-print in which matter is non-being, privation, mere absence of perfection.

1. Primary matter in the Scholastic tradition

In the *Specimen Dynamicum* of 1695 Leibniz writes that “the *primitive force of being acted* *upon* [vis primitiva patiendi] or of *resisting* constitutes that which is called *primary matter* in the schools, if correctly interpreted.”[[4]](#footnote-4)

 To which Scholastic doctrines regarding primary matter is Leibniz’s referring? And which one of the Scholastics’ quite radically diverging views on primary matter, if any, does Leibniz regard as the “correct interpretation”? The notion of primary matter is obviously rooted in Aristotelian hylomorphism and its conception of primary substances as substances which are composites of matter and form. *Materia* further qualified as *prima* is matter considered *secundum se*, that is, matter considered according to what it is in itself, matter according to its fundamental ontological status. In this broadly Aristotelian framework, primary matter is the ultimate subject of change implied by the Aristotelian analysis of change as involving a substratum in which now a certain form, then another form inheres.[[5]](#footnote-5) As Suárez puts it:

“And hence it is clear that if we speak of primary matter in general and quasi formally, that is, [if we speak] of the first subject of changes or forms, abstracting from the question of what is that subject and which form is received in it, it is as evident that there is primary matter as it is evident that there are in things changes toward various forms, because some subject is supposed in any change”.[[6]](#footnote-6)

Primary matter is thus the ultimate substratum or the ultimate subject of inherence. The very notion of a substratum seems to suggest that primary matter has a positive ontological status, namely, that it is some kind of indeterminate ‘stuff’ in which forms inhere. The intuitive picture is that of clay which receives a form, being shaped, say, into a vase, and then into a statue and so on. However, as usual when thinking with metaphysical rigour, things turn out not to be (literally) quite so simple.

1.1. Aquinas and simplicity: primary matter as pure potentiality

A further, also broadly Aristotelian intuition is the view that, in order to be a substance, an entity must be *unum per se*, that is, must have an intrinsic unity which distinguishes it from being a mere aggregate of parts or elements such as a pile of stones or a flock. This raises the question (which plagued Leibniz as well as present-day commentators on him) of what it is for a thing to be one *per se*. One promising starting point is to look at the one being that is bound to satisfy the requirements for being a substance – God. Not surprisingly, this is the strategy followed by Aquinas. For Aquinas, God is altogether simple (*omnino simplex*).[[7]](#footnote-7) There is no composition in Him; his essence cannot be resolved into metaphysical constituents; in Him there is identity even between existence and essence. In creatures, on the other hand, there is a distinction between essence and existence, and corporeal substances are also composites of form and matter.[[8]](#footnote-8) Nevertheless, in order to qualify as a substance, a composite creature must also be one *per se*, and this means for Aquinas that its unity must imitate in relevant ways the absolute simplicity of God. As Marilyn Adams notes, “one traditional argument for divine simplicity rests on the axiom that parts are naturally prior to the whole of which they are a part; that is, the whole depends for its existence on the existence of the parts, not vice versa. If God has parts, He would depend on them for His existence and they would not depend on Him”.[[9]](#footnote-9) Similarly, in order to be more than composites endowed with mere accidental unity, created substances must not have constituents that are naturally prior to them. This condition cannot be satisfied when constituents have an actuality of their own, as in the case of the wood and stones from which a house is build. Wood and stones are natural bodies which are substances in their own right. Indeed they are substances in the primary sense of being *hoc aliquid* (this something) composed of a substantial form which gives actuality to what in itself is merely potential, namely matter.[[10]](#footnote-10) The house, on the other hand, is an artificial composite which depends for its existence on the existence of these primary substances (wood and stones) which are naturally prior to it. Its unity is not the intrinsic unity provided by a substantial form which actualizes what would otherwise be merely potential and therefore of itself non-existent, but the accidental unity provided by an accidental form which supervenes (*advenit*) on pre-existing things with their own actuality.[[11]](#footnote-11) Hence Aquinas maintains that nothing ‘one *per se*’ has more than one constituent with an actuality of its own.[[12]](#footnote-12) It follows that for composites of form and matter to qualify as substances, only one constituent can have an actuality of its own. According to Aquinas, this is in fact the case since primary matter receives *all* its actuality from the form. Of itself primary matter is pure potentiality and, as such, it cannot exist apart from the composite.[[13]](#footnote-13)

In short, the negative answer to the question ‘What is it for a thing to be one *per se*?’, is as follows: it must not have constituents which are prior to the thing under consideration, as parts are. And what is it which makes parts prior to the thing under consideration? It is their having an actuality of their own, that is, it is their being some kind of ‘thing’ of their own which can exist separately, and on which the composite depends. As such, these constituents are metaphysically more primitive than the composite of which they are parts. In so far as beings one *per se* do not have such parts and, on the contrary, have only one constituent with its own actuality (the substantial form), they imitate in the relevant way the absolute simplicity of God. As we will see, Leibniz’s mature metaphysics can be interpreted as taking this intuition to its extreme and most rigorous consequences.

1.2. Later Scholastics

Aquinas’s view that primary matter of itself is pure potentiality seems to have been regarded by Descartes as the Scholastics view tout court. As Descartes writes (AT III, 212, 2-4): “The School makes matter ‘pura potentia’”. No doubt he had encountered this view in his formal education. In one of the commentaries of the school of Coimbra on Aristotle’s *Physics*, we read: “Matter in itself [*secundum se*] is pure potentiality, that is, neither actuality, nor something composed of potentiality and actuality” - a definition followed by the further confident assertion of the agreement on this point between the Aristotelian and Platonic schools.[[14]](#footnote-14) In fact, later Scholastics profoundly disagreed on this issue.

For Duns Scotus, for instance, primary matter must be a positive entity really distinct (that is, separable) from the form.[[15]](#footnote-15) Scotus finds it contradictory to maintain both that primary matter is part of a composite and yet that it does not have a positive being of its own. If it does not have a positive being of its own, it is non-being, and as such it cannot be a constituent part of a composite.[[16]](#footnote-16) In fact, if matter were not a positive principle, there would be no composite substances at all, but only simple substances. However, in an Aristotelian framework, substances must be composed, since this very composition explains the change of which generation and corruption are instances. Change needs a *recipiens* (matter) and a *receptum* (the form) which are really distinct from one another.

“That which receives [*recipiens*] is really distinct from that which is received [*receptum*]. Since therefore there is in generable substance a *recipiens* and a *receptum*, it follows that there is there a certain entity [aliqua entitas] really distinct from matter: otherwise it would follow that there is no generable substance truly composed, but only simple [*substance*] – which does not agree [with experience]. *Moreover* [...] that which is caused [*causatum*] is really distinct from whatever is the cause of it, whether extrinsic or intrinsic [...] Since therefore matter and form are two intrinsic causes of a natural being [*entis naturalis*], it follows that there are two entities in that being really distinct from one another”.[[17]](#footnote-17)

In other words, Scotus’s key objection against Aquinas’s conception of primary matter is that matter conceived as pure potentiality is nothing (*nihil*): “If you want to have proper pure potency, without any act, you will have *nothing*: as in privation without a subject”.[[18]](#footnote-18)Andas Scotus rightly points out, a conception of matter as non-being cannot be reconciled with Aristotle’s doctrine of matter as a substratum of inherence of forms: “Those who say that matter is a being in potency [*ens in potentia*] in the first manner,[[19]](#footnote-19) say that matter is simply non-being [*dicunt eam simpliciter esse non ens*], and do not appear to preserve Aristotle’s intention either.”[[20]](#footnote-20) On the contrary, according to Scotus, matter is something (*aliquid*). To be sure, this something will have minimal actuality (*infimus actus*) and will be in a relation of potentiality toward all other acts. Nonetheless, it is still something as opposed to nothing, and it still has an actuality of its own.[[21]](#footnote-21)

Ockham agrees with Scotus in seeing primary matter as a positive principle with an actuality of its own. For him primary matter is a naturally (although not necessarily) extended, fully actual ‘stuff’.[[22]](#footnote-22) As we read in the *Summula Philosophiae Naturalis* (liber I, cap. 9), matter has some being of its own independently of any substantial form inhering in it:

“Matter is some sort of thing [*quaedam res*] actually existing in the nature of things, which is in potentiality toward all substantial forms [...] And on that account one should not imagine that in itself matter is something merely in potency in the way in which future whiteness is merely in potency; on the contrary it is truly in act by itself [...] And for that reason it does not have its own being [*esse*] from the form, but is some entity indistinct from some being [*esse*] or entity deprived of other being or entity which it can receive (obviously the form) [...] And these two partial beings [*matter and form*] or two partial entities constitute or make one totality [*unum totum*], or, more properly speaking, they are two parts of one *ens* or total being which is totally composed out of them”.[[23]](#footnote-23)

Suárez, in turn, also thinks that primary matter has an existence of its own. Although it does not naturally exist on its own and is always naturally found in conjunction with some form or another, it is logically and metaphysically possible for God to preserve primary matter without any form inhering in it.[[24]](#footnote-24) This view follows from Suárez’s denial of a real distinction (as opposed to a distinction of reason *cum fundamento in re*) between existence (*esse*) and essence (*essentia*) in actual things.[[25]](#footnote-25) Existence is not a form which actualizes a mere potentiality (the essence); existence is “nothing else but the actual essence itself”.[[26]](#footnote-26) That is, one must not confuse ‘being in act’ intended as ‘actually existing’ (*actus entitativus seu existentiae*) with ‘being in act’ intended as ‘being informed by a substantial form’ (*actus formalis*). Hence, an essence’s existence does not imply ipso facto a form which gives actuality to what is merely potential. It follows that there is no logical or metaphysical incoherence in the existence of matter without any form inhering in it.[[27]](#footnote-27) In fact, matter must have some kind of existence of its own in order to receive the form.[[28]](#footnote-28)

Matter simpliciter is physical matter as a really distinct element which, together with form, enters into the composition of material beings. It is said to be primary matter (*materia prima*) when it is the ultimate subject of inherence (in Suárez’s phrase, “primum subjectum ex quo fit aliquid”). It is said to be secondary matter (*materia secunda*) when it presupposes a prior subject.[[29]](#footnote-29)

To go back to Aquinas, Aquinas could have rightly replied to Scotus (as well as to Ockham and Suárez) that a conception of primary matter as pure potentiality does not imply that it is mere non-being, since there is a key difference between never existing by itself, and being nothing in itself. The fact that primary matter is always informed by one form or another, which gives to it the actuality that by itself (being pure potentiality) it does not have, does not reduce primary matter to nothing. This a line of defence, however, seems to clash with other commitments of Aquinas, such as that “numerically the same prime matter exists in what is generated as in what is corrupted.”[[30]](#footnote-30) If prime matter gets *all* its actuality from substantial form *A* how can it be numerically the same with prime matter which gets *all* its actuality from substantial form *B*? And if it is not numerically the same prime matter, how can it fulfil its function of substratum of change, of subject of inherence?

2. Leibniz

Leibniz is certainly closer to Aquinas’s view that matter is pure potentiality and, as such, cannot exist without one form or another inhering in it, than to the later Scholastics, who see matter as a positive ontological principle with an actuality of its own and capable of existing without any substantial form inhering in it. Yet he is much more radical than Aquinas. As Scotus and Ockham had pointed out, conceiving primary matter as pure potentiality leads to the identification of primary matter with non-being. Leibniz does not recoil from such conclusion and, either deny that primary matter is pure potentiality (as Scotus and Ochkam had done) or, deny that pure potentiality is mere non-being (as Aquinas had done).[[31]](#footnote-31) Instead, his considered position is in line with the conclusion that primary matter, being pure potentially, is non-being. In short, in my view, Leibniz moves away from the Aristotelian framework of primary substances as composites of two positive ontological constituents, form and matter, of which matter is the ultimate subject of inherence, toward a more frankly Neoplatonic (or more precisely Plotinian) framework in which matter is identified with non-being. It should be noted that Plotinus identifies therefore matter with evil.[[32]](#footnote-32) As it will appear, this Plotinian claim is not without resonances in Leibniz’s notion of metaphysical evil.

2.1. Primary matter, passivity, and bodies’s resistance and inertia

In order to uncover Leibniz’s position, we can begin from the famous account of the layers of his ontology given by Leibniz to De Volder. Writing on 20 June 1703, Leibniz states:

“I distinguish therefore (1) the primitive Entelechy or Soul, (2) Matter, i. e. primary matter, or primitive passive power, (3) the Monad completed by these two, (4) the Mass [*Massa*] or secondary matter, or organic machine, for which countless subordinate Monads come together [*ad quam concurrunt*], (5) the Animal or corporeal substance, which is made One by the Monad dominating the Machine”[[33]](#footnote-33).

I consider here only points (1) to (3). The identification of primary matter with the passive power of a substance or monad can be found in other texts.[[34]](#footnote-34) Moreover, in a letter to Bernoulli of 1698, Leibniz indicates that primary matter is *exhaustively* explained in terms of passivity: “When I said that *primary matter* is that which is merely passive and separate from souls and forms, I said the same thing twice; that is, it is just as if I had said that it is merely passive and separate from all activity.”[[35]](#footnote-35)

There can also be little doubt that the typical Leibnizian pair ‘passivity / activity’ maps onto the Scholastic pair which we have encountered so far - ‘potentiality / actuality’. According to Aquinas, potentiality is the principle of passivity in created substances, as opposed to actuality or act [*actus*], which is the principle of activity.[[36]](#footnote-36) It is clear that, with the pairs ‘passivity / activity’ and ‘primitive passive power’ / ‘primitive active power’, Leibniz is therefore capturing the Thomist and broadly Aristotelian contrast between ‘potentiality / actuality’ as corresponding to ‘primary matter’ and ‘substantial form’.

In other texts, Leibniz goes a step further and asserts that from primary matter, conceived as passivity, or primitive passive power, or primitive force of resisting, spring some fundamental properties of bodies, namely impenetrability, resistance, and inertia. In a letter to Thomas Burnett of Kemney of February 1700, for instance, we read:

“Primitive matter, however, or matter taken in itself, is what is conceived in bodies when all the principles of unity are set aside, that is to say, what is passive, from which spring two qualities: *resistance* [*resistentia*] *and holding back* [*restitantia*] *or inertia*. That is to say that a body does not allow itself to be penetrated, and rather gives way to another, but that it does not give way without difficulty and without weakening the total motion of the one that pushes it. Thus it can be said that matter in itself, beyond extension [*outre l’etendue*], includes primitive passive Power. But the principle of unity contains the primitive Active power, or the primitive force, which is never lost and always perseveres in an exact order of its internal modifications, which represent those that are outside it.”[[37]](#footnote-37)

In turn, in the *Specimen Dynamicum* of 1695, the passage (cited above), identifying the primitive force of resisting action with the Scholastic notion of primary matter, is followed by the claim that this force is the source of the impenetrability of bodies and their inertia, conceived (as in Kepler) as resistance of bodies to motion:

“The *primitive force of being acted* *upon* [*vis primitiva patiendi*] or of *resisting* constitutes that which is called *primary matter* in the schools, if correctly interpreted. This force is that by virtue of which it happens that a body cannot be penetrated by another body, but presents an obstacle to it, and at the same time is endowed [*sit praeditum*] with a certain laziness, so to speak, that is, an opposition to motion, nor, further, does it allow itself to be put into motion without somewhat diminishing the force of the body acting on it. As a result, the *derivative force of being acted upon* later shows itself to different degrees in *secondary matter*.”[[38]](#footnote-38)

2.2. Primary matter, primitive passive power, and creaturely limitation

At this point, we can finally come to the connection between primary matter or primitive passive power, and creaturely limitation. As I have argued in another paper, following in the footstep of the Neoplatonic identification of the nature of evil in itself as lack of being, Leibniz sees any lack of being, any limitation in perfection, any negation or privation of further perfection,[[39]](#footnote-39) as evil.[[40]](#footnote-40) Precisely in so far as any such imperfection or limitation is formally an instance of non-being, it is, formally, evil. Evil simpliciter, as non-being, lack of being, “simple imperfection” (*Theodicy*, § § 21; GP VI, 115) or “imperfection in general” (*Tractatio de Deo et Homine*), is captured by his notion of ‘metaphysical evil’. In particular, creaturely limitation is for him the most fundamental form of ‘metaphysical evil’, that is, the most fundamental and pervasive case of lack of being. Creaturely limitation expresses a metaphysical necessity, namely, that creatures qua creatures cannot but be imperfect for the very fact that they are not God. As Leibniz puts it in the *Theodicy*, § 20, “there is an *original imperfection in the creature* before sin, because the creature is essentially limited”.

In order to indicate this original imperfection or limitation of creatures, Leibniz uses a distinctive image inspired by his studies in physics: “the original limitation of creatures” is like the “natural inertia of bodies”, that is, the natural resistance of bodies to motion. Such resistance is not an action or an active power of bodies but a passivity or lack of receptivity of the active motive force resulting in a “privation of speed”.

Let us consider three key texts in which this notion is developed.

“The celebrated Kepler and, after him, M. Descartes (in his Letters) have spoken of the ‘natural inertia of bodies’; and it is something which may be regarded as a perfect image and even a sample of the original limitation of creatures, to show that privation constitutes the formal nature of the imperfections and disadvantages to be found in substance as well as in its actions. Let us suppose that the current of one and the same river carried along with it various boats, which differ among themselves only in the cargo, some being laden with wood, others with stone, and some more, the others less. That being so, it will come about that the boats most heavily laden will go more slowly than others, provided it be assumed that the wind or the oar, or some other similar means, assist them not at all. It is not, properly speaking, weight which is the cause of this retardation, since the boats are going down and not upwards ... It is therefore matter itself which originally is inclined to slowness or privation of speed; not indeed through the lessening of this speed, once it has already received it, since that would be acting, but through moderating by its receptivity the effect of the impression, when it is to receive it. Consequently, since more matter is moved by the same force of the current when the boat is more laden, it is necessary that it go more slowly; and experiments on the impact of bodies, as well as reason, show that twice as much force must be employed to give equal speed to a body of the same matter but of twice the size. But that indeed would not be necessary if the matter were absolutely indifferent to repose and to movement, and if it had not this natural inertia whereof we have just spoken to give it a kind of repugnance to being moved. Let us now compare the force which the current exercises on boats, and communicates to them, with the action of God, who produces and conserves whatever is positive in creatures, and gives them perfection, being and force: let us compare, I say, the laden boat with the defects to be found in the qualities and the action of the creature; and we shall find that there is nothing so just as this comparison. The current is the cause of the boat’s movement, but not its retardation; God is the cause of the perfection in the nature and the actions of the creatures, but the limitation of the receptivity of the creature is the cause of the defects there are in its actions. Thus the Platonists, St. Augustine and the Schoolmen were right to say that God is the cause of the material aspect of evil which consists in the positive, and not of the formal aspect of evil, which consists in privation; as one can say that the current is the cause of the material aspect of the retardation, without being [the cause] of its formal aspect, that is to say, it is the cause of the boat’s speed without being the cause of the limits of this speed” (*Theodicy*, § 30; GP VI, 119-121; I have modified E. M. Huggard’s translation).

“Every purely positive or absolute reality is a perfection, and [...] every imperfection comes from limitation, that is, from the privative: for to limit is to withhold progress, or the further beyond. Now God is the cause of all perfections, and as a consequence of all realities, when they are considered as purely positive. But limitations, or privations, result from the original imperfection of creatures which limits their receptivity. It is as with a laden boat, which the river carries along more slowly or less slowly in proportion to the weight that it bears: thus the speed comes from the river, but the retardation which limits this speed comes from the load” (“Abregé de la Controverse reduite à des Argumens en forme”; GP VI, 383; I have modified Huggard’s translation).

“69. [...] There is no perfection and purely positive reality in creatures and in their actions which is not due to God; but the imperfection of actuality consists in privation, and arises from the original limitation of creatures, which they have from their essence already in the state of pure possibility (i. e. in the Region of eternal Truths or in the ideas which show themselves [*obversantibus*] in the Divine intellect): for something lacking limitation would not be a creature but God. [...] 70. But since what we have maintained, following Augustine, Thomas, Lubinus,[[41]](#footnote-41) and other ancient and more recent authors, regarding the privative constitution of evil is considered by many [to be] empty or at least obscure, we will show from the nature of things itself, that nothing appears to be more solid - by employing a similitude with something sensible and material which consists also in privation [*quod etiam in privativo consistit*] and to which Kepler, the eminent investigator of nature, assigned the name of *natural inertia of bodies*. 71. Indisputably (to use an easy example) when a river carries boats with itself, it impresses speed to them but [this speed is] limited by their inertia so that (all other things being equal) the heavier boats are carried more slowly. It is so that speed is from the river, slowness from the load; what is positive is from the power of that which impresses motion [*a virtute impellentis*], the privative from inertia in being moved. 72. In exactly the same way, one should say that God gives perfection to Creatures which is limited, however, by the receptiveness of those very creatures: so goods are from God’s force [*a Divino vigore*]; evils from the sluggishness of the creature. 73. Likewise the intellect will often err due to lack of attention, the will will often be broken down by lack of alacrity, as often as the mind, which should aim at God or the highest Good, cleaves by inertia to creatures” (*Causa Dei*, §§ 69-73; GP VI, 449-450).

 These texts indicate that inertia or resistance to motion is not only the result in bodies of the primitive passivity which characterizes any created substance. This primitive passivity is in turn the expression of the original imperfection and limitation of creatures. In the passage from the *Theodicy*, there is an explicit indication that we are dealing here with more than an analogy. Inertia in bodies is not just “a perfect image” used to signify creaturely limitation. It is a *sample* (“un echantillon”) of the results that creaturely limitation has in bodies.[[42]](#footnote-42) Likewise, in a note by Leibniz to § 42 of the *Monadology*, the original imperfection of creatures is not merely presented as something analogous or comparable to the natural inertia of bodies but as something which is *manifested* in the natural inertia of bodies (“This *original imperfection* of creatures is noticeable [se remarque] in the *natural inertia* of bodies”).[[43]](#footnote-43) Inertia and resistance are derivative features in bodies of the primitive passivity which is an aspect of all created substances due to the necessary imperfection and limitation of creatures qua creatures. I would therefore venture to say that Leibniz’s notion of primary matter is, at bottom, nothing else than his notion of creaturely limitation. For Leibniz the notion of primary matter expresses the fact that creatures qua limited and imperfect beings have an intrinsic passivity, from which features of bodies such as impenetrability, resistance and inertia ultimately result.[[44]](#footnote-44)

Moreover, it seems to me that here (as elsewhere) the most fundamental pair for Leibniz is not activity and passivity, or actuality and potentiality, or form and matter, but perfection and imperfection. That is, ‘perfection – imperfection’ is the metaphysically more primitive pair in terms of which activity and passivity can be explained.[[45]](#footnote-45) Now, in itself imperfection is not a being, is not a ‘something’, but the *lack*, the absence of something. Imperfection is the limitation of perfection, that is, the negation or privation of further perfection. As the *Causa Dei* puts it, the “imperfection of actuality consists in privation, and originates from the original limitation of creatures [*imperfectionem actus in privatione consistere, et oriri ab originali limitatione creaturarum*]”.[[46]](#footnote-46) It seems clear that by “imperfection of actuality” is meant the imperfection of the primitive active force in creatures, that is, their primitive passivity. The formal nature of this primitive passivity is that of being a privation of activity originating from creaturely limitation.

In this regard it is significant that Leibniz proposes a metaphysical derivation of the properties of creatures from a limitation or negation of God’s properties.[[47]](#footnote-47) Creation *ex nihilo* is re-interpreted as represented by his novel binary arithmetic or dyadic in which 1 and 0 indicate God and nothingness.[[48]](#footnote-48) God or “the primitive unity” is “the positive”; zero is “the privative”. As in the binary system all numbers result from the combination of 1 and 0, so creatures are different combinations of “the positive” with the “privative”.[[49]](#footnote-49) Creatures’ properties are nothing else than limited, imperfect versions of God’s properties; they are privations or negations (in different degrees) of the perfections of God. Their limitation is nothing else than an instance of non-being. In my view, it is precisely because Leibniz fully subscribes to a Neoplatonic conception of the nature of evil as non-being that he is not afraid to categorize creaturely limitation as metaphysical evil. Creaturely limitation as the most general case of metaphysical evil is not some kind of reality with a positive ontological status that adversely affects the goodness of creatures. It is merely a way to describe the fact that the goodness of such creatures is limited.

2.3. Objections and replies

At this point one could wonder whether Leibniz’s association of creaturely limitation with primitive passive power is in tension with the conception of evil *in se* as strictly non-being, which Leibniz needs to avoid compromising the goodness of God’s creation. A power as such indicates the ability to do something, to produce a result, to cause certain effects. If it can produce results, effects, if it is a causal power, it cannot be non-being. Primitive passive power seems to have its own fundamental metaphysical operation – as we have seen, it is the source of such pervasive features of bodies as impenetrability, resistance, and inertia. An aspect of created substances which has such fundamentally important results can hardly be mere non-being.

On the other hand, these very results seem to indicate, after all, some kind of activity. It seems that proper powers, precisely in so far as they *do* something, can only be active. It seems that a genuine power is a capacity to produce certain outcomes. This is the sort of power possessed by causes: they have the capacity to produce or determine certain effects. On the contrary, the ability or capacity to be acted on, to be affected or effected, does not seem to be properly described as a power to do something. It is an ability/capacity but not really a power.[[50]](#footnote-50) Passive powers are, at bottom, just a way to describe the effects of the limited and imperfect active powers of creatures, precisely in so far as they are limited and imperfect.

The texts on inertia seem to me to present exactly this picture. Inertia is not some kind of positive force which pulls back or slows down the heavy boat, and in so doing makes it go slower than the lighter boat. The resistance to motion of the heavy boat is not a positive force holding back the boat. The only forces at work are (as always) *active* forces – the force of the river; the positive properties of the bodies on the river. In other words, as suggested by the model of inertia or resistance to motion, primitive passive force does not seem to be a causal power but merely an expression of the lack of responsiveness of the positive properties of things to active forces. As Leibniz writes in the *Theodicy* passage, “It is [...] matter itself which originally is inclined to slowness or privation of speed” but “not indeed of itself to lessen this speed, having once received it, *since that would be action*, but to moderate by its receptivity the effect of the impression when it is to receive it” (*Theodicy*, § 30 ; GP VI, 120; my emphasis). In conclusion, passive powers are not genuine powers, something which is added as a positive constituent of a substance. They are merely a way to express the limitation or negation of some further perfection of the active forces, precisely as primary matter merely expresses the limitation and imperfection of a substance.

 One could still object that, in the passage from the *Theodicy* quoted above, Leibniz explicitly speaks of limitation as *causing* the defects which are in the actions of creatures. A fortiori he also repeatedly suggests that passive powers *cause* certain effects. However, in my view, ‘cause’ is used here in an extended sense, and not in the strict sense of being a positive power to do certain things. I can say that ‘slowness’ was the cause of my arriving last at the race. But slowness is not some positive quality which attaches to me, or some positive but contrary force which limits my speed. It is just a way to describe my power to run at a certain speed in comparison to the power to run at a certain speed of other people. This positive power for (limited) speed is the only causal power involved. A more precise concept to be used in connection to limitation resulting in defects of actions of creatures would have been, I think, that of *ratio*, reason, rather than cause (two notions that Leibniz in fact distinguishes in other texts).[[51]](#footnote-51) In a deleted remark in a letter to De Volder of 1704 or 1705, Leibniz interestingly writes: “Matter can be said to be Real insofar as there is in simple substances the *reason* [*ratio*] of what is observed in phenomena that is passive” (GP II, 276).[[52]](#footnote-52) Note that Leibniz is not saying that matter *is* real, but that matter *can be said* to be real insofar as with this notion one points to the *reason* of the passivity (such as resistance to motion or inertia of bodies) observed in phenomena.[[53]](#footnote-53) This is consistent with thinking of this reason as the limitation of the active powers of simple substances rather than as some additional causal power.[[54]](#footnote-54)

A further objection, however, is that Leibniz maintains that the active without the passive, or the passive without the active, is incomplete.[[55]](#footnote-55) Primitive active force and primitive passive force are both abstractions. They are never found in creatures without one another. As Leibniz writes in the letter to De Volder of 20 June 1703, “the Monad” is “completed by these two”. It seems to be the affirmation of two ontologically positive ingredients which need to come together to make a complete being.

I don’t think this is the case. It seems to me that we are dealing here with a *distinctio rationis*,[[56]](#footnote-56) that is, a distinction which – crucially – does not exist prior to intellectual activity and which is due to an operation of the mind abstracting aspects of what is really only one thing. Passive and active aspects of a monad are said to be incomplete in the sense that in created monads activity is always accompanied by a degree of passivity. If no created monad is pure activity, then considering the active aspect of a monad without considering the limitation in such activity is an incomplete way to consider a created substance. To Bernoulli, who had objected that if active force is an incomplete element of substance, then God, who is pure actuality, is incomplete,[[57]](#footnote-57) Leibniz replies: “God doubtless is pure act [purus actus], since he is most perfect. But imperfect things are passive, and if we conceive of them otherwise, they are taken incompletely [*summuntur incomplete*]” (17 December 1698; GM III, 560; trans. by Adams: *Leibniz*, p. 363).

This interpretation is consistent with Leibniz’s revealing addition to a letter to Arnauld of 1687 that matter is “always essential to the same substance” (A II, 2, 251). Leibnizian primary matter can no longer be thought of as the Aristotelian substratum of substantial change that can belong to different substances - now the vase of clay, then the clay statue; now the living man, then the corpse - depending on which form inheres in it at a certain point.[[58]](#footnote-58) Leibnizian primary matter is always essential to the same substance because it is merely a way to consider the limitation of that substance.

In my view, this is the way to read a letter of 16 October 1706 to Des Bosses:

“Concerning the question whether an entelechy may change matter, I draw the following distinction, as you write I have already done: an entelechy changes its organic body or secondary matter, but it does not change its own primary matter. Mr. Bayle does not seem to have understood my opinion about this well enough. Primary matter is essential to any entelechy and is never separated from it, since it completes it and is itself the passive power of the entire complete substance. [...] Therefore, although God through his absolute power could deprive a substance of secondary matter, he nevertheless cannot deprive it of primary matter, for from this he would produce pure act as he himself alone is. [...] You see from this that incomplete substances are abolished; they are a monstrosity in true philosophy.”[[59]](#footnote-59)

Primary matter completes a created substance not in the sense that it is a positive ontological constituent, but in the sense that a created substance considered without its limitation is considered in an incomplete way. Indeed, a created substance with no limitation (that is, no primary matter) is a metaphysical impossibility and Leibniz prides himself in having eliminated such monstrosity from true philosophy. Not even God could do the impossible, namely create a being which is pure act, since such a being would be no creature but God. If primary matter is not something added to the entelechy but simply an expression of the limitation of that very entelechy, it becomes clear why it is impossible to separate an entelechy from its primary matter.

In sum, primary matter or primitive passive power, as corresponding to creaturely limitation, is not a ‘something’, a positive ontological constituent added to form to make a substance, but merely a way to indicate that creatures *lack* further perfection, that is, a way to indicate that there are degrees of active power or activity which creatures *do not* have.

A most striking text in this regard is a note by Leibniz in a series of extracts from William Twisse, *Dissertatio de* *Scientia Media* (Arnhem 1639):

“Being posited or actuality, and restriction or the privative are in beings like metaphysical form and metaphysical matter [*Positio vel actus, et restrictio vel privativo se habent in entibus ut forma metaphysica et materia metaphysica*]. And thus the matter of things is nothing [*est nihilum*]: that is, limitation; [their] form is perfection.”[[60]](#footnote-60)

2.4. Simplicity

This also helps explaining why Leibniz from 1695 onwards comes to think of *simplicity* as the single property which best captures what it is, in metaphysical rigour, to be a substance. As Aquinas had maintained, something that is one *per se* (as a substance must be in order to qualify as such) cannot have more than one constituent that has an actuality of its own. Hence, for Aquinas, matter in composite substances is pure potentiality which receives all its actuality from form. Scotus challenged such a position, pointing out that it is inconsistent to think of primary matter as not having an actuality of its own and yet being a constituent of a composite. If it is pure potentiality, it is non-being and, as a result, there is no such thing as a *composite* of two positive ontological constituents.

It seems to me that Leibniz pushes these thoughts to their extreme consequences. He maintains, like Aquinas, that an entity one *per se* can have only one constituent which has an actuality of its own – the form, or entelechy, or active power. But unlike Aquinas, and in line with Scotus’s objection, he concludes that, if the other so-called constituent, matter, does not have an actuality of its own, it can only be non-being. If this is the case, then any entity which is one *per se* is *not* and *cannot be* a composite being. Any entity which strictly qualifies as one *per se*, and therefore as a substance, is a simple being.

As we have seen above, Scotus had already noted that, if matter were not a positive principle, there would be no composite substances but only simple substances. But since composition is needed to explain generation and corruption, as Scotus maintained, matter is a positive principle and there are composite substances. This reasoning resonates in a striking way in the *Monadology*, but turned up-side-down: matter is not a positive principle; therefore there are, ultimately, only simple substances, which as such cannot be generated or corrupted: “there is no conceivable manner in which a simple substance could naturally perish. For the same reason there is no manner in which a simple substance could begin naturally, since it could not be formed through composition.” (*Monadology*, §§ 4-5; GP VI, 605). These simple substances are metaphysically primitive due to the absence of any dependence on parts or constituents which could be regarded as prior to the whole. In the program of ontological minimalism pursued by Leibniz, this is exactly what he had been looking for – the metaphysically primitive level of being to which everything else can be reduced.

Conclusion

I propose that Leibniz’s considered view in his mature metaphysics (that is, when he is focused on outlining his own conception as opposed to cajoling someone unlikely to buy his full metaphysical package) is that “the matter of things is nothing: that is, limitation”. For Leibniz, primary matter is a noun, a term to describe the limitation of the only one *actual* constituent of simple (that is, metaphysically primitive) substances.

This has momentous consequences for Leibniz’s theory of substance. At the most fundamental ontological level, in Leibniz’s system there is no matter as some sort of ‘being’, ‘thing’, or ‘stuff’, to be combined with form, entelechy, activity, or primitive active force. In so far as something *is*, it is active, form, entelechy, albeit limited and imperfect. There is nothing else there – just a certain (limited) degree of being and perfection; just a certain (sometimes very low and confused) degree of perception. As we read in a text of 1683, “substances have Metaphysical matter or passive power insofar as they express something confusedly [Substantiae habent materiam Metaphysicam seu potentiam passivam quatenus aliquid confuse exprimunt]”[[61]](#footnote-61) This is why Leibniz, in certain mature presentations of his ontology, leaves out primary matter in monads altogether and speaks only of simple substances that are soul-like (that is entelechies, centres of activity).

Our contemporary sensibility recoils from the claim that matter is nothing, or, even worse, that matter is evil. But one has to ask what that claim really means. Does it ‘do away’ with the sensible world, the world that we experience? The reluctance to allow such a thing seems to me what lay behind some attempts to construe Leibnizian matter as some sort of Aristotelian substratum or late scholastic ‘stuff’. My answer is ‘no’, Leibniz’s claim that ‘the matter of things is nothing’ does not ‘do away’ with the sensible world. Form and matter, even in Leibniz’s idiosyncratic version, are primitive explanatory principles that are supposed to account (give reason) for the empirically observable range of effects in the sensible world of which we have experience. His aim is to explain the world of objects and ‘stuff’, not to deny it. This very world of ‘stuff’ and sensible objects is what Leibniz is interested in. This is the starting point of Leibniz’s inquiry. His point of arrival is not its denial, but its explanation. In eliminating primary matter as a ‘thing’, a ‘res’, Leibniz is not eliminating the *facts* of our experience of the world as encounters with extension, impenetrability, solidity, resistance (that is, the facts of the corporeal world). Rather, he is reducing these facts to facts about simple substances with limited degrees of perfection, limited degrees of perception, limited degrees of active powers.[[62]](#footnote-62) He is not saying that these empirically observable facts are illusions, but that they are *phenomena bene fundata*, well founded phenomena, expressing something which is ultimately real.[[63]](#footnote-63) In sum, this is Leibniz’s Ockham razor, ruthlessly shaving away any reducible *entia* in favour of minimal ontological commitments.

1. This paper was presented at seminars in Oxford and King’s College London. I would like to thank participants for their helpful feedback. Thanks are due to Sarah Tropper for many fruitful conversations on the topic, and to Christian Barth and Donald Rutherford for their comments. My greatest debt is to Howard Hotson for his insightful reading of a mature draft. Unless otherwise stated translations are my own. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. R. M. Adams: *Leibniz*: *Determinist, Theist, Idealist*, Oxford 1994, p. 376. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. “Extraits de Twisse”, c. 1695 (Grua, 355-356): “Being posited or actuality, and restriction or the privative are in beings like metaphysical form and metaphysical matter [Positio vel actus, et restrictio vel privativo se habent in entibus ut forma metaphysica et materia metaphysica]. And thus the matter of things is nothing [est nihilum]: that is, limitation; [their] form is perfection.” Attention to this passage is drawn by Gianfranco Mormino: “La limitation originaire des créatures chez Leibniz”, in: E. Pasini (ed.): *La Monadologie de Leibniz: genèse et context*, Paris – Milan 2005, pp. 55-83 (see p. 74). [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. GM VI, 236-7; quoted from: G. W. Leibniz: *Philosophical Essays*, trans. by R. Ariew and D. Garber, Indianapolis and Cambridge 1989, pp. 119-20 (hereafter AG followed by page number). [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. See Aristotle: *Physics*, Book I, Chapter 7. Cf. M. M. Adams: *William* *Ockham*, Notre Dame 1987, vol. 2, p. 635. This part draws on her pellucid discussion of the different conceptions of primary matter in Aquinas, Scotus and Ockham, pp. 633-669. On medieval theories of matter see also the interesting study of Antonio Petagine: “La materia come ‘ens in potentia tantum’. Tra la posizione de Sigieri di Brabante e la critica di Pier di Giovanni Olivi”, in: C. König-Pralong, O. Ribordy and T. Suarez-Nani (eds): *Pierre de Jean Olivi. Philosophe et Théologien*, Berlin - New York 2010, pp. 295-325. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Francisco Suárez: *Disputatio* 13, sectio I, 4 in: *Disputationes Metaphysicae*, Salamanca 1597 (now: Disputatio). Online version at http://homepage.ruhr-uni-bochum.de/michael.renemann/Suárez/index.html. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. See Thomas Aquinas: *Summa Theologiae*, Pars I, Q. 3., Art. 7. On Aquinas’ doctrine of God’s simplicity see Christopher Hughes: *On a complex theory of a simple God*: *An investigation in Aquinas’ Philosophical Theology*, Ithaca – London 1989, Part I. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. There is a sense in which for Aquinas even angels or spiritual substances have a composition of form and matter. I am grateful to Sarah Tropper for drawing my attention to a key passage from the *Quaestio disputata de spiritualibus creaturis* (Art. I, “Respondeo”) in which this view is entertained by Aquinas. When matter is merely understood as potentiality, one can say that there is matter also in angels. On the other hand, Aquinas notes that this is not the way in which the word ‘matter’ is usually taken (“hoc modo natura spiritualis substantiae, quae non est composita ex materia et forma, est ut potentia respect sui esse; et sic in substantia spirituali est compositio potentiae et actus, et per consequens formae et materiae; sit tamen omnis potentia nominetur materia et omnis actus nominetur forma. Sec tamen hoc non est proprie dictum secundum communem usum nominum”). It is clear that for him matter is also something else, as indicated by his doctrine that angels lack the principle of individuation provided in corporeal substances by *materia signata* (designated matter). Hence, in order to explain individuation in angels or spiritual substances, Aquinas needs to maintain that each angel is a species by itself. Interestingly, in the “Discours de métaphysique” § 9, Leibniz extends to all substances Aquinas’s claim that in the case of angels each individual is a *species infima* or lowest species (A VI, 4, 1541). This is an indication that Leibniz is much more radical than Aquinas in reducing matter to mere potentiality, as we will see. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. M. M. Adams: *Ockham*, vol. 2, p. 668. See Aquinas: *Summa Theologiae*, Pars I, Q. 3., Art. 7, “Respondeo”. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. See Aquinas: *Sentencia De anima*, Lib. 2 l. 1 n. 5: “substantia dividitur in materiam et formam et compositum. Materia quidem est, quae secundum se non est hoc aliquid, sed in potentia tantum ut sit hoc aliquid. Forma autem est, secundum quam iam est hoc aliquid in actu. Substantia vero composita est, quae est hoc aliquid.” [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. Cf. Aquinas: *Sentencia De anima*, Lib. 2 l. 1 n. 8: “quod corporum, quaedam sunt corpora physica, id est naturalia; quaedam non naturalia, sed artificialia. Homo enim et lignum et lapis sunt naturalia corpora, domus et securis sunt artificialia. Magis autem videntur substantiae corpora naturalia quam artificialia, quia corpora naturalia sunt principia artificialium. Ars enim operatur ex materia quam natura ministrat; forma autem quae per artem inducitur, est forma accidentalis, sicut figura vel aliquid huiusmodi. Unde corpora artificialia non sunt in genere substantiae per suam formam, sed solum per suam materiam, quae est naturalis.” *Materia* is here intended as secondary matter, that is, not as the ultimate subject of inherence which receives all its actuality from substantial form, but as an entity already in act on which a new (accidental) form supervenes (cf. below Suárez’s distinction between primary and secondary matter). *Ibid*., Lib. 2 l. 1 n. 14: “Sciendum autem est quod haec est differentia formae substantialis ad formam accidentalem, quod forma accidentalis non facit ens actu simpliciter, sed ens actu tale vel tantum, utputa magnum vel album vel aliquid aliud huiusmodi. Forma autem substantialis facit esse actu simpliciter. Unde forma accidentalis advenit subiecto iam praeexistenti actu. Forma autem substantialis non advenit subiecto iam praeexistenti in actu, sed existenti in potentia tantum, scilicet materiae primae. Ex quo patet, quod impossibile est unius rei esse plures formas substantiales; quia prima faceret ens actu simpliciter, et omnes aliae advenirent subiecto iam existenti in actu, unde accidentaliter advenirent subiecto iam existenti in actu, non enim facerent ens actu simpliciter sed secundum quid.” [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. M. M. Adams: *Ockham*, vol. 2, p. 638. [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. See for instance Aquinas: *Summa contra gentiles*, Lib. 2, cap. 43, n. 5: “materia non potest esse absque omni forma”; Lib. 4, cap. 63, n. 5: “materia prima sine forma esse non possit.” [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. Étienne Gilson: *Index Scolastico-Cartésien*, Paris 1979, p. 170. [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. See John Duns Scotus: *Quaestiones in Lib. II Sententiarum*, Lib. II, Distinctio XII, Quaestio I: “Utrum in substantia generabili, et corruptibili, sit aliqua entitas positive realiter distincta à forma?”: “*Materiam esse entitatem realiter distinctam à forma*” (in: *Opera Omnia*, ed. Luke Wadding, Lyons 1639, vol. VI, p. 671; hereafter Wadding followed by volume and page number). For Scotus, separability is the necessary and sufficient condition for real distinction in the realm of creatures. See Richard Cross: *Duns Scotus*, New York-Oxford 1999, p. 149; Richard Cross: *Duns Scotus on God*, Aldershot 2005, p. 109 (note 36). [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
16. See M. M. Adams: *Ockham*, vol. 2, p. 642. [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
17. Scotus: *Quaestiones in Lib. II Sententiarum*, Lib. II, Distinctio XII, Quaestio I (Wadding VI, 669-670). [↑](#footnote-ref-17)
18. Scotus: *Quaestiones subtilissimae, in Metaphysicam Aristotelis* (Wadding IV, 681). [↑](#footnote-ref-18)
19. Scotus refers here to what he calls “objective potentiality” (*potentia obiectiva*) as opposed to “subjective potentiality” (*potentia subiectiva*). Objective potentiality is the ‘object’ or ‘term’ of potentiality, e.g. the statue which could be made out of the lump of clay currently on my desk. The lump of clay does exist on my desk and has subjective potentiality to be shaped into a statue; the statue, on the other hand, does not exist and has merely objective potentiality. [↑](#footnote-ref-19)
20. Scotus: *Quaestiones subtilissimae, in Metaphysicam Aristotelis* (Wadding IV, 680). [↑](#footnote-ref-20)
21. See Scotus: *Quaestiones subtilissimae, in Metaphysicam Aristotelis* (Wadding IV, 681). [↑](#footnote-ref-21)
22. See M. M. Adams: *Ockham*, vol. 2, pp. 643, 681, 685, 690. [↑](#footnote-ref-22)
23. In William Ockham: *Opera Philosophica*, vol. VI, ed. Stephen Brown, St. Bonaventure1984, pp. 179-180. [↑](#footnote-ref-23)
24. See to Suárez: *Disputatio*15, sectio IX. [↑](#footnote-ref-24)
25. See Suárez: *Disputatio* 31. [↑](#footnote-ref-25)
26. Suárez: *Disputatio* 31, sectio XIII, 18. Cf. *Disputatio* 15, sectio IX, 4: “Nec vero dici potest materiam existentem per actum existentiae realiter distinctum iam habere formam, quia omnis actus est forma. Hoc enim axioma falsum est iuxta illam sententiam, etiam de actu actuante; auctores enim illius sententiae ponunt in uno supposito substantiali formam substantialem et actum existentiae realiter distinctum, et non admittunt duas formas substantiales; ergo existentia substantialis non est forma substantialis.” [↑](#footnote-ref-26)
27. See Suárez: *Disputatio* 15, sectio IX, 5-6. [↑](#footnote-ref-27)
28. Suárez: *Disputatio* 15, sectio IX, 6: “materia esset quidem in actu entitativo seu existentiae et in potentia ad actum formalem, in quo nulla est repugnantia aut difficultas, cum potentia receptiva necessario includat aliquam entitatem et actualitatem entitativam”. This view echoes the Scotist distinction between *potentia subiectiva* and *potentia obiectiva*. Cf. Suárez, *Disputatio* 15, sectio IX, 9: “respondent Scotus et alii committi aequivocationem in nomine potentiae et actus; nam materia dicitur pura potentia subiectiva, quae si in sua puritate sit, carebit actu informante; cum vero dicitur omnem rem existentem esse in actu, intelligitur de actu entitativo, quod non opponitur potentiae subiectivae, sed obiectivae tantum.” A lump of clay has both actuality (qua lump of clay) and potentiality, namely, the subjective potentiality of becoming a statue. Hence actuality is opposed only to the objective potentiality of the non-actual statue, not to the subjective potentiality of the actual lump of clay. On Scotus’s distinction see above, footnote 19. [↑](#footnote-ref-28)
29. Suárez: *Disputatio* 13, sectio I, 3. [↑](#footnote-ref-29)
30. M. M. Adams: *Ockham*, vol. 2, p. 642. Cf. Aquinas, *Summa contra gentiles*, Lib. 4, cap. 63, n. 6: “in qualibet conversione naturali manet subiectum, in quo succedunt sibi diversae formae.” [↑](#footnote-ref-30)
31. See Aquinas: *Commentaria in octo libros Physicorum*, Lib. 1, Lectio 15, n. 2: “philosophi tetigerunt materiam, sed non sufficienter; quia non distinguebant inter privationem et materiam: unde quod est privationis, attribuebant materiae. Et quia privatio secundum se est non ens, dicebant quod materia secundum se est non ens. ... nos ipsi dicimus ... materia est non ens secundum accidens, sed privatio est non ens per se: hoc enim ipsum quod est infiguratum, significat non esse, sed aes non significat non esse, nisi inquantum ei accidit infiguratum. Secundo vero quia materia est *prope rem*, et est aliqualiter, quia est in potentia ad rem, et est aliqualiter substantia rei, quia intrat in constitutionem substantiae: sed hoc de privatione dici non potest.” Interestingly, the young Leibniz seems to attribute to Aquinas an ontologically weaker conception of matter than Aquinas would accept. In an annotation on the “Demonstrationum Catholicarum Conspectus” of 1668-1669 he writes: “materia sec. Thomam est non Ens”. Cf. R. M. Adams: *Leibniz*, p. 349 (note 17). [↑](#footnote-ref-31)
32. See *Enneads*, II.4.16.3, II.5.4-5, III. 6. 7. 1-19 for the claim that matter is non-being; *Enneads*, I.8.3.35-40, I.8.8. 37-44, I.8.13. 7-14, for a description of matter as “evil per se”, or “evil in itself”. For a sophisticated discussion of how these claims should be interpreted, see for instance Dennis O’Brien, “Plotinus on matter and evil”, in: Lloyd P. Gerson (ed.): *The Cambridge Companion to Plotinus*, Cambridge 1996, pp. 171-195. Plotinus’s matter is the ‘indefinite’, the ‘undelimited’, the absence of any determination rather than “what is not in any way at all” (see Plato, *Sophist*, 237b7-8). [↑](#footnote-ref-32)
33. GP II, 252; Trans. by R. M. Adams in: *Leibniz*, p. 265. [↑](#footnote-ref-33)
34. See for instance “De Ipsa Natura”, 1698; GP IV, 510; Leibniz to Des Bosses, 30 April 1709; GP II, 371. [↑](#footnote-ref-34)
35. GM III, 554. Trans. by R. M. Adams in *Leibniz*, p. 362, where this point is made. See also GM III, 541; *Nouveaux Essays* (A VI, 6, 378): “la [*matiere*] *premiere* ... est quelque chose de purement passif”; Leibniz to Remond, 4 November 1715 (GP III, 657): “la *matiere premiere* et pure prise sans les ames ou vies qui luy sont unies, est purament passive”. [↑](#footnote-ref-35)
36. See for instance Thomas Aquinas: *De Spiritualibus Creaturis*, art. 1, ad 16. R. M. Adams: *Leibniz*, p. 349, notes, “potentiality is certainly a passive principle for Aquinas, by contrast with the actuality or act [Latin *actus*] that constitutes form.” [↑](#footnote-ref-36)
37. A I, 18, 376; trans. by R. M. Adams: *Leibniz*, p. 371. [↑](#footnote-ref-37)
38. GM VI, 236-7; AG 119-120. See also “De Ipsa Natura”, 1698; GP IV, 510-511. A discussion of the notions of secondary matter and of derivative forces is beyond the limits of this paper. It is enough for present purposes to say that secondary matter is, roughly, the organic body of a corporeal substance “or organic machine, for which countless subordinate Monads come together” (GP II, 252; Leibniz to De Volder; 20 June 1703); derivative forces are the forces studied by physics and conceived by Leibniz as modifications of primary forces. [↑](#footnote-ref-38)
39. See Maria Rosa Antognazza: “Metaphysical Evil Revisited”, in: S. Newlands and L. Jorgensen (eds.): *New Essays on Leibniz’s Theodicy*, Oxford 2014, pp. 112-134. As I explain in this paper, Leibniz (unlike the main Scholastic tradition) does not distinguish between negation and privation. [↑](#footnote-ref-39)
40. Christian Barth has offered to me the intriguing suggestion that Leibniz may be using the Aristotelian, substantial notion of primary matter in his metaphysics of substance, while using the neo-platonic notion in moral contexts. However, it seems to me that the neo-platonic notion of matter as non-being accounts for central claims of Leibniz’s metaphysics. Moreover, although the discussion moves at this point to the issue of evil, the focus is not on moral aspects but on the ontology of evil. [↑](#footnote-ref-40)
41. Eilhardus Lubinus (1565-1621), German Lutheran theologian, philosopher, and mathematician. [↑](#footnote-ref-41)
42. See *Theodicy*, § 30; GP VI, 119: “[…] *l’inertie naturelle des corps* [...] c’est quelque chose qu’on peut considerer comme une parfait image et même comme un echantillon de la limitation originale des creatures”. [↑](#footnote-ref-42)
43. Addition to § 42 in a copy of the manuscript of the *Monadology*, revised by Leibniz (GP VI, 613). [↑](#footnote-ref-43)
44. Cf. J. A. Cover and John O’Leary-Hawthorne: *Substance and Individuation in Leibniz*, Cambridge 1999, p. 226: “reference to passivity as a kind of imperfection inherent in all creatures [...] it is the passive aspect of a substance that Leibniz has identified as primary matter, not any proper constituent of a substance.” According to Cover - O’Leary-Hawthorne, Leibnizian primary matter is “at best … an *ens rationis*” (*ibidem*). [↑](#footnote-ref-44)
45. See R. M. Adams: *Leibniz*, p. 376. Anne-Lise Rey argues that, for Leibniz, action can be understood as a perception expressing degrees of perfection or reality (see Anne-Lise Rey: “[L’ambivalence](http://www.leibniz-bibliographie.de/DB%3D1.95/SET%3D1/TTL%3D3/MAT%3D/NOMAT%3DT/CLK?IKT=4&TRM=L'ambivalence) de la [notion](http://www.leibniz-bibliographie.de/DB%3D1.95/SET%3D1/TTL%3D3/MAT%3D/NOMAT%3DT/CLK?IKT=4&TRM=notion) [d’action](http://www.leibniz-bibliographie.de/DB%3D1.95/SET%3D1/TTL%3D3/MAT%3D/NOMAT%3DT/CLK?IKT=4&TRM=d'action) [dans](http://www.leibniz-bibliographie.de/DB%3D1.95/SET%3D1/TTL%3D3/MAT%3D/NOMAT%3DT/CLK?IKT=4&TRM=dans) la [dynamique](http://www.leibniz-bibliographie.de/DB%3D1.95/SET%3D1/TTL%3D3/MAT%3D/NOMAT%3DT/CLK?IKT=4&TRM=dynamique) de [Leibniz](http://www.leibniz-bibliographie.de/DB%3D1.95/SET%3D1/TTL%3D3/MAT%3D/NOMAT%3DT/CLK?IKT=4&TRM=Leibniz): la correspondance entre Leibniz et De Volder, 2e partie”, in: *Studia Leibnitiana*, 41 / 2 (2009), pp. 157-182). [↑](#footnote-ref-45)
46. See also “Abregé”; GP VI, 383: “limitations, or privations, result from the original imperfection of creatures which limits their receptivity.” [↑](#footnote-ref-46)
47. On this point see the illuminating paper by Samuel Newlands: “Leibniz on Privations, Limitations, and the Metaphysics of Evil”, in: *Journal of the History of Philosophy* 52/2 (2014): 281-308. I am grateful to Samuel Newlands for allowing me to read a draft of his paper. See also Albert Heinekamp: *Das Problem des Guten bei Leibniz*, Bonn 1969, p. 155. [↑](#footnote-ref-47)
48. See in particular an enclosure of his letter of 18 May 1696 to Duke Rudolf August of Wolfenbüttel (A I, 12, 66-72, here p. 66). Leibniz gives the following title to his memo for the Duke: “Wunderbarer Ursprung aller Zahlen aus 1 and 0 welcher ein schöhnes Vorbild gibet des Geheimnißes der Schöpfung; da alles von Gott und sonst aus Nichts, entstehet: Essentiae Rerum sunt sicut Numeri.” Cf. Maria Rosa Antognazza: *Leibniz: An Intellectual Biography*. Cambridge – New York 2009, pp. 357-359. [↑](#footnote-ref-48)
49. Leibniz writes in a letter of 14 May 1698 to Andreas Morell (A I, 15, 560): “Dieu est l’unité primitive, exprimée par toutes les autres suivant leur portée. Sa bonté l’a mû à agir, et il y a en luy trois primautés, pouvoir, sçavoir et vouloir; c’est de quoy resulte l’operation ou la creature, la quelle est variée selon les differentes combinaisons de l’unité avec le zero; ou bien du positif, avec le privatif; car le privatif n’est autre chose que les limites, et il y a partout des limites dans la creature, comme il y a partout des points dans la ligne.” See also *De organo sive arte magna cogitandi*, March-April 1679 (A VI, 4, 158). Leibniz claims that the possibility of expressing all numbers through a “dyadic progression” provides an “admirable similitude” of the origin of everything “from pure Being”, namely God, “and nothing”: “Fieri potest, ut non nisi unicum sit quod per se concipitur, nimirum Deus ipse, et praeterea nihilum seu privatio, quod admirabili similitudine declarabo. Numeros vulgo explicamus per progressionem decadicam ... quam commode id factum sit nunc non disputo; illud interea ostendam, potuisse ejus loco adhiberi progressionem dyadicam ... spes nulla sit homines in hac vita ad hanc seriem rerum arcanam pervenire posse, qua pateat quanam ratione cuncta ex Ente puro et nihilo prodeant”. I am grateful to Shane Duarte for drawing my attention to this text. [↑](#footnote-ref-49)
50. I am grateful to Tom Pink for an illuminating conversation on this point. [↑](#footnote-ref-50)
51. See *Elementa verae pietatis* (c. 1677-1678; A VI, 4, 1360); *De rerum originatione radicali* (23 November 1697; GP VII, 302). On the distinction in Leibniz between ‘causa’ and ‘ratio’ see Stefano Di Bella: “Causa sive Ratio. Univocity of reason and plurality of causes in Leibniz”, in: M. Dascal (ed.): *Leibniz: what kind of rationalist?*, Berlin 2008, pp. 495-509. [↑](#footnote-ref-51)
52. Trans. by Adams in: *Leibniz*, p. 386 (footnote 13). I retain Adams’s italics. [↑](#footnote-ref-52)
53. Immediately before the passage from the “Abregé” quoted above, Leibniz remarks that there is a meaning of “real” which includes also privative beings. “*Reel* signifie ou ce qui est positif seulement, ou bien il comprend encor les êtres privatifs” (GP VI, 383). [↑](#footnote-ref-53)
54. It seems to me that this is the sense in which also the following passage should be read: “It faut encore considerer, que la matiere n’est pas une chose opposée à Dieu, mais qu’il la faut opposer plustost à l’actif borné, c’est à dire à l’ame ou à la forme. Car Dieu est l’estre supreme, opposé au Neant, dont la matiere resulte aussi bien que les formes, et le passif tout pur est quelque chose de plus que le neant, estant capable de quelque chose, au lieu que rien ne se peut attribuer au neant.” (*Considerations sur la doctrine d’un Esprit Universal Unique*, 1702; GP VI, 537). Matter or pure passivity is contrasted with the limited active power (“l’actif borné” or form) of which it expresses the imperfection. This passivity is more than mere “nothing” insofar as it is the reason of the imperfection of creatures’ actions. The context of this claim is that of a Manichean-like view of matter as a principle of passivity opposed to God. Leibniz rejects the suggestion of an independent principle opposed to God implied by this position since strictly “nothing” can be opposed to the “supreme being”. On the contrary, even matter or passivity ultimately “result” from God insofar as they are necessary aspects of created beings. I am grateful to Donald Rutherford for drawing my attention to this passage. [↑](#footnote-ref-54)
55. See for instance Leibniz to Bernoulli (GM III, 551). [↑](#footnote-ref-55)
56. Cf. Cover and O’Leary-Hawthorne: *Substance and Individuation*, pp. 225-226. More precisely, in my view, this would be a distinction akin to Suárez’s *distinctio rationis ratiocinatae*, that is, a distinction of the reasoned reason which (as opposed to the *distinctio rationis ratiocinantis*) has a foundation in reality (see Suárez: *Disputatio* 7, sectio I, 4). [↑](#footnote-ref-56)
57. GM III, 555f. Cited by R. M. Adams: *Leibniz*, p. 363. [↑](#footnote-ref-57)
58. This point is made by R. M. Adams: *Leibniz*, p. 347. [↑](#footnote-ref-58)
59. *The Leibniz-Des Bosses Correspondence*, translated, edited and with an Introduction by B. C. Look and D. Rutherford, New Haven and London 2007 p. 79. [↑](#footnote-ref-59)
60. Grua I, 355-356: “Extraits de Twisse”. This is an annotation on extracts from Twisse’s “Digressio Secunda, in qua quae in Metaphysicis, Disp. 25 sect. I. De Ideis disserit Suarez, ad examen revocantur.” (*Dissertatio de Scientia Media*, pp. 278-317). The distinction between *forma metaphysica* and *materia metaphysica* is found in Suárez (see *Disputatio* 13, sectio I and *Disputatio* 15, sectio XI). However, Leibniz does not follow Suárez in the meaning of this terminology. By *forma metaphysica* Suárez means the full essence of a thing (*tota rei essentia*) or the nature of a thing. Thus the metaphysical form of material substances includes both form and matter, since matter is a constituent of their essence or nature (see *Disputatio* 15, sectio XI). In turn, the notion of metaphysical matter is for Suárez a merely analogical and metaphorical notion, according to which, for instance, genus can be regarded as ‘matter’ in relation to differentia, since genus is determined or ‘contracted’ (limited) by differentia in analogy with the determination of matter by form (see *Disputatio* 13, sectio I, 2 and *Disputatio* 15, sectio XI, 12). On the contrary, by *forma metaphysica* and *materia metaphysica* Leibniz seems simply to mean substantial form and primary matter, as shown below in the quotation in which *materia metaphysica* is equated with *potentia passiva* (A VI, 4, 1504). I am grateful to Sidney Penner for drawing my attention to Suárez’s distinctive notions of *forma metaphysica* and *materia metaphysica*. [↑](#footnote-ref-60)
61. *De modo distinguendi phaenomena realia ab imaginaria*; A VI, 4, 1504. Trans. by R. M. Adams: *Leibniz*, p. 364. [↑](#footnote-ref-61)
62. This is analogous to what Ockham does with quantity forms. See M. M. Adams: *Ockham*, vol. 2, p. 694. [↑](#footnote-ref-62)
63. See Leibniz to De Volder, 1704-1705; GP II, 275: “Ego vero non tollo corpus, sed ad id quod est revoco, massam enim corpoream quae aliquid praeter substantias simplices habere creditur, non substantiam esse ostendo, sed phaenomenon resultans ex substantiis simplicibus quae solae unitatem et absolutam realitatem habent”; Leibniz to Nicolas Rémond, 11 February 1715; GP III, 636: “Quant à l’inertie de la matiere, comme la matiere elle même n’est autre chose qu’un phenomene, mais bien fondé, resultant des monades, il en est de même de l’inertie, qui est une proprieté de ce phenomene”. [↑](#footnote-ref-63)