Common Notions and Immortality in Digby and the Early Leibniz

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**Abstract**

Discussions about the relation between confessionalization and early modern natural philosophy have tended to focus on the influence of certain theological doctrines characteristic for the different Christian denominations on specific contents of the analysis of the material world. By contrast, I would like to argue that an obstacle to formulating all-too general confessionalization claims derives from ecumenical uses of early modern natural philosophy that serve to provide rational grounds for commonly acceptable theological views. One such ecumenical approach can be found in the work of Kenelm Digby. I develop such a line of interpretation by comparing Digby’s argumentative strategy with the argumentative strategies of one of his readers, Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz, who in his early writings developed a sophisticated version of mechanical philosophy. Leibniz refers to Digby’s analysis of the powers of organism, and, like Digby, he uses the limits of these powers as arguments for the existence of immaterial, and hence immortal human souls. The convergence between Digby and the early Leibniz on this central theological point can be seen as an outcome of the analysis of our common notions concerning the nature of matter and of the analysis of our common notions concerning the mental capacities of humans.

1. Introduction

Discussions about the relation between confessionalization and early modern natural philosophy tend to focus on the question of how theological doctrines that are specific to the different confessions have influenced the theoretical contents of works in natural philosophy. Division between the different confessions thus are meant to explain diverging approaches to the analysis of natural particulars. There are areas where such an interpretive approach is highly plausible. One such much-discussed area concerns the influence that competing conceptions of the eucharist had on philosophical questions concerning whether or not qualities could subsist independently of substances (Leijenhorst & Lüthy, 2001; Hellyer, 2005: 90–113; Haga, 2012; Gellera, 2013). Another prominent area concerns the influence of competing views concerning divine providence on the interpretation of astronomical phenomena such as the occurrence of comets and new stars (Methuen, 1999; Vermij, 2010; Westman, 2011; Almási, 2014). From the perspective of such well-documented fields of influence of theological issues central to the formation of confessions, some historians even have spoken of *the* confessionalization of natural philosophy during the early modern period (Lüthy, 2005).

However, in other fields the influence of theological concerns may be less unambiguous. One such field may be the development of natural history. Peter Harrison conjectures that the disappearance of allegorical interpretation of animals in many early modern natural histories could be explained by what he regards as the literalist hermeneutics of the Reformers (Harrison, 1998, 4). Here is not the place to discuss this claim in detail; elsewhere, I have argued that the hermeneutics of Reformers such as Johannes Oecolampad, Huldrych Zwingli, Martin Luther and Jean Calvin allowed for the moral interpretation of biblical passages about animals where textual evidence shows that this is the intended meaning of the biblical text (Blank, forthcoming). If so, confessionalization may not offer the explanation sought by Harrison. In the present article, I would like to draw attention to a further sense in which the relation between confessionalization and natural philosophy may have been more complex than commentators have assumed. This sense derives from the observation that not all natural philosophers in the age of confessionalization have supported the dynamics of confessionalization. Some of them have responded to confessionalization by propagating ecumenicism in the sense of providing rational support for theological views that could be shared by members of different confessions.

Here, I will support the latter claim by taking a comparative approach to Sir Kenelm Digby’s natural philosophy and will compare it with some aspects of the early natural philosophy of one of his readers, Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz (1646–1716). There is certainly more than one perspective from which such a comparison can be instructive. As Peter Harrison has pointed out, there are remarkable parallels in Digby’s and Leibniz’s interest in the theory of palingenesis—the supposed regeneration of plants from the ashes of plants—which uses natural philosophy to lend plausibility to the possibility of the resurrection of *bodies* (Harrison, 1998, 152–156; on Leibniz’s views on palingenesis, see Blank 2011). Here, however, I will be concerned with the parallels between Digby’s and Leibniz’s interest in the uses of natural philosophy for lending plausibility to the possibility of the resurrection of *souls*. As I will argue, exploring these latter parallels points toward the relevance of the epistemological notion of common notions for Digby’s and Leibniz’s ecumenical uses of natural philosophy.

Of course, it may be asked why Digby and Leibniz took such a project to be persuasive. I would like to argue that the convergence between Digby and the early Leibniz concerning the natural ground for the doctrine of the immortality of the soul can be understood as an outcome of their usage of common notions in evaluating philosophical hypotheses. The relevant technical sense of ‘common notions’ not only indicates that the concepts in question are general; it also indicates that the concepts in question are expressed in common language. While both Digby and the early Leibniz believed that it is the task of philosophy to formulate hypotheses that can provide explanations for the phenomena in the material world and the mental life of humans, they also held that compatibility of hypotheses with everyday concepts is a valid criterion for the evaluation of hypotheses, as long as there is no evidence that indicates that our everyday concepts are flawed. This metaphilosophical intuition shapes Digby’s and Leibniz’s analysis of our common notions concerning the nature of matter, as well as their analysis of our common notions concerning the mental capacities of humans. If so, then the use of common notions in Digby and the early Leibniz can be understood as being a part of an ecumenical strategy that uses natural philosophy to *counter* the dynamics of confessionalization.

I will proceed as follows: Section 2 will clarify the sense in which both Digby and Leibniz could be understood as pursuing an ecumenical program. Section 3 will examine the epistemology of common notions expressed in ordinary language. Section 4 will investigate the epistemic role that common notions have in Digby’s and Leibniz’s analysis of the nature of matter. Section 5, finally, will analyze how Digby and Leibniz use concepts based on everyday observations concerning mental capabilities to identify a realm of phenomena that cannot be explained by material factors alone.

2. Ecumenism and Common Theology

The role of ecumenism in early modern natural philosophy is easily obscured by the ambiguity of the concept of ecumenism. According to one sense, ecumenism can be understood as an ecclesiological concept centered on the idea of the reunion of churches. Of course, this idea played a significant role throughout Leibniz’s career (Li, Poser and Rudolph, 2013; Basso 2017). But, as Stefania Tutino has pointed out, Digby did not say much about ecclesiology, and Thomas White (1593–1676), Digby’s mentor and associate during their exile in Paris, leaned toward a Gallican model (Tutino, 2016, sec. 3.2; on White, see Krook 1993, ch. 4; Southgate 1993). Unlike Leibniz, then, Digby cannot be understood as an ecumenicist in the ecclesiological sense. Still, as John Henry has argued, there is a second sense of ecumenism. According to this second sense, ecumenism can be understood as being centered on the concept of a common theology—that is, a theology that can be accepted by members of different Christian denominations. In some respects, the early Leibniz was more optimistic about the prospects of such a program than Digby. For instance, Leibniz took it to be a real possibility that a philosophical treatment of the eucharist could be acceptable for both Lutherans and Catholics (Fouke 1992). No such attempt can be found in Digby. Still, there seems to be something misleading about characterizing Digby, as Tutino does, as a “rational Catholic” (Tutino, 2016, 37). This is so because Digby does not use natural philosophy to defend claims concerning immortality that are specific to a particular confession.

As John Henry has argued, Digby’s *Two Treatises* contributes to the program of a common theology because it sidesteps the confessional differences that divide Catholic dogma from the theology of the Church of England. While Catholic dogma holds that human beings (composed of body and soul) are naturally immortal but undergo a phase of purgatory before they go either to heaven or to hell, theologians of the Church of England tended to ascribe the immortality of both human bodies and human souls to a supernatural Divine intervention and combined this view with millenarian speculations (Henry, 1982, 223–227). Digby offers a conception of natural immortality of the human soul that implicitly excludes both the possibility of purgatory and the possibility of a millenarian period at the end of times because he thinks that, after death, souls separated from their bodies just remain in the state they were at the time of death (TT, 443–445). Leibniz may have been more sympathetic to the idea of purgatory than Digby (Rudolph 2017). But he never offered any considerations drawn from natural philosophy to support the doctrine. And he rejected an eschatological reading of millenarianism and referred the prophecies of the Revelation of John to events in the past (Strickland & Cook, 2011). What Digby and the early Leibniz thus have in common is that they do not use natural philosophy to support ideas that separate the different confessions. Rather, they use natural philosophy to support the idea that the different confessions have a rationally acceptable core that they could share.

Taking a comparative approach to Digby and the early Leibniz is legitimate not only with a view to their metaphilosophical similarities but also with a view to the influence that Digby had on Leibniz. More than once, Leibniz made it clear that he took Digby as one of the models for his own early approach to philosophy—an approach that is highly eclectic and conciliatory. As Leibniz writes in the *Confessio Naturae Contra Atheistas* (1669):

At the beginning, I agreed easily that one should concede to the contemporary philosophers, who resuscitate Democritus and Epicurus, and whom Robert Boyle aptly called ‘corpuscularians’, such as Galileo, Bacon, Gassendi, Descartes, Hobbes and Digby, that in order to explain the corporeal phenomena one should not have recourse to God, nor to any incorporeal being, form or quality, without necessity. (A VI, 1, 489–490)

Of course, the final qualification is crucial since, the early Leibniz was very ready to allow for the existence of incorporeal beings—namely, human souls and the divine mind—but he believed that he had philosophical arguments from the nature of matter that show why accepting the reality of such immaterial entities is necessary. What Leibniz found impressive about Digby is the strategy of saving some Aristotelian intuitions with the framework of modern corpuscularian philosophy. For instance, Leibniz mentions Digby and White alongside with Julius Caesar Scaliger, Johannes de Raey, Abdias Trew and Erhard Weigel as pioneers in the reconciliation between Aristotle and the moderns (A VI, 2, 438). More specifically, in the *Hypothesis Physica Nova,* probably written in the winter of 1670–1671,Leibniz explains what his own version of the notion of ether shares with Digby’s and White’s natural philosophy:

Aristotle and his German interpreter [Erhard Weigel] together with the subtlest *Thomas White* and the famous Digby cannot be upset with me. They have four *elements:* earth, water, air, fire; I have ether at the place of fire, hence where is there more than a difference of words? Because Aristotle's pure fire, such as is supposed by him under the sphere of the moon, or above the air, is also conceded by me (who thinks that ether is higher than air) or according to the view of Aristotle it does not burn: but it is rightly called fire, because our *fire* is caused by the stream of collected and exploding ether. Nevertheless, I have preferred the name of *ether,* because I ascribe to it many different and huge effects unobserved by these authors. The meaning of ordinary fire is by far different, and my ether is the cause of common fire rather than its matter ... (A VI, 2, 246)

As Leibniz explains, “the rare and the dense are rightly for Digby the most general differences of things, for even those qualities that the Aristotelians call first qualities derive from there. For the hot is what rarefies, the cold is what condensates, the humid is what is rare, the dry is what is dense …” (A VI, 2, 246; see TT 172). But Leibniz did not only agree with these aspects of Digby’s matter theory, he also planned to integrate Digby’s arguments for the immortality of the soul into his projected *Catholic Demonstrations* (A VI, 1, 494–495). As Hartmut Rudolph has succinctly put it, Leibniz’s outline for this project is one of his “writings in which he, as a member of the Lutheran Church, tries to formulate the concern on the Catholic side in such a way that it needs not be abandoned, but it can rather be preserved in agreement with the Protestant side” (Rudolph, 2017, 27). The plan to integrate Digby’s immortality proofs into his own ecumenical project clearly shows that Leibniz was aware of the potential of Digby’s line of argument to be integrated into a project that not only aimed at developing elements of a common theology but also aimed at using this common theology for the purpose of the reunification of Churches.

3. Common Notions and Common Usage

The motivation to provide a philosophical basis for theological views that could be commonly shared explains Digby’s and Leibniz’s interest in notions expressed in ordinary language. The sources of inspiration for Digby’s view of common notions were quite different from Leibniz’s sources of inspiration. To clarify the sense in which he understands “those plain, easie, and primary notions, which nature stampeth alike in all men of common sense, and understanding,”

Digby advises his readers to consult Thomas White’s opinion that the notion of place should correspond to common usage (TT, 7). As White puts it:

What I have said about the notion of place has the same force in all meanings of the ten genera. For all of them have arisen from nature and are common to the entire human species, and their reasons have to be gathered from what humans commonly say about them, and not from opinions of scholars, or the figurative speech of orators. (White, 1642, 28)

Unfortunately, White does not elaborate on why we should rely on what is natural for us to think and say. To fill this lacuna, it is instructive to note that there are significant similarities between Digby’s views on common notion and the views found in the work of one of his acquaintances in Paris, Pierre Gassendi (1592–1655). It is not far-fetched to suggest that Gassendi might have been an important source for Digby. As John Henry has pointed out, Digby discusses an atomist argument of Gassendi’s, which was unpublished at the time (Henry 1982, 215, n. 22; see TT 154–155). Therefore, it seems plausible to assume that Digby’s view of common notions may be influenced by the view of common notions in Gassendi’s epistemology, unpublished at the time of the *Two Treatises*.

In his *Animadversiones in decimum librum Diogenis Laertii* (1649), Gassendi treats the terms “common notions” (*notiones communes*), “anticipation” (*anticipatio*) and “foreknowledge” (*praenotio*) as synonyms (Gassendi, 1649, 136; on Gassendi’s sources, see Detel, 1978, 33–38). He clearly distinguishes between two senses in which notions can be said to be “common”. The first sense is *generality*:

[A]n anticipation is at first some singular thing, or, so to speak, the idea of a singular thing, in so far as it is impressed by a singular thing and represents the singular thing by which it is created; but subsequently it is a universal, insofar as not only the thing by which it is created but also by means of its imitation several similar ones are imagined by the mind. (Gassendi, 1649, 137–138)

Gassendi is clear that, since different persons encounter different singular things, different persons form different general concepts. In this sense, not all general notions are in the minds of all humans (Gassendi, 1649, 138). However, there is second sense of being “common”: some notions are not only general but also found in the minds of all rational beings. Gassendi sets this sense of being “common” apart from theories of innate ideas:

[E]ven if anticipations that are in us are said to be internal to us, they are this in such a way that we acquire them through the use of senses and do not have them from nature, or we can say that we have them only in so far as they are in us from some long time as we become informed through the things through which we began to live and sense; of this kind are the notions concerning fleeing pain and seeking pleasure … (Gassendi, 1649, 136–137).

Gassendi is explicit that these notions can be called “common” in the sense that they are common to all humans with normal mental capacities (Gassendi, 1649, 136). And, as the example of common notions concerning pleasure and pain suggests, what makes them common to all humans is that they derive from experiences common to all humans.

From an epistemological point of view, Gassendi regards common notions in both senses as a second “criterion” (*criterium*) of truth that is meant to supplement the senses that function as the first criterion of truth. As he explains, a criterion is “an organon or an instrument of judging” (Gassendi, 1649, 120). Being an instrument of judging, however, does not imply that the criterion itself should be regarded as being self-evident. Rather, Gassendi holds that those common notions that we should take to be evident are those that are confirmed by repeated sense experience (Gassendi, 1649, 136). By contrast, he concedes that there are other common notions that do not pass this test and therefore should be regarded as mere suspicions (*suspiciones*) and false opinions (Gassendi, 1649, 136). The revisability of common notions comes to the fore when Gassendi identifies common notions with Cicero’s notion of “presumption” (Gassendi, 1649, 136). In the Roman-law tradition, arguments from presumption are based on assumptions that are taken to be true unless and until contrary evidence becomes available—an idea that was widely taken up in early modern argumentation theory (Blank 2019). Characterizing common notions as presumptions thus indicates that common notions should be understood as *starting points* for evaluating arguments—as starting points that can themselves be evaluated.

What makes the conception of common notions as presumptions plausible is the Epicurean insight that we need anticipation if we want to inquire, doubt or believe anything. In this sense, they can be regarded as “principles” of reasoning—not as something that cannot be questioned itself, but rather as something that makes the process of inquiry possible. As Gassendi points out (1649, 140), from this perspective the figure of Torquatus in Cicero’s *De finibus* draws the distinction between insights that are conclusions of rational arguments and insights that require only attention (*animadversio*) and reminders (*admonitio*) (Cicero, 2010, 1.9.30). According to this distinction, the former insights concern things that are taken (*iudicentur*) to be hidden or to be in need to be disentangled, while the latter insights that are taken to be at hand and to be open to view. Emphasis on the idea of “being taken” to be hidden or open to view is significant here since even those insights that are taken to belong to the second category can turn out to be wrong. But as long as they are not refuted by other criteria of truth such as sensation, they can function as criteria of truth. As long as there is no contrary evidence, it is rational to trust our natural cognitive capacities, without thereby taking the workings of our natural cognitive capacities to be infallible.

An example of how common notions could be revised can be found in White’s *De mundo*. There he contrasts the view that all events are contingent with the view that all events happen with necessity. He is clear that the first view corresponds to our common notions: “As far as terms are concerned, whose proper meaning depends on their usage, effects and their causes are in fact called contingent” (White 1642, 361). However, he explains this common linguistic usage through the fact that, due to our inherent cognitive limitation, we know only a part of the causes of an effect, such that the occurrence of the effect seems uncertain and, hence, contingent to us. However, White argues, this view has to be overturned since the collection of all causes of an effect make the occurrence of the effect necessary (White 1642, 360). This is a good example of how common notions can be revised. What is needed is an argument that shows in which sense our cognitive limitations lead to erroneous notions. This pattern of argument thus closely corresponds to Gassendi’s view of common notions as presumptions, (even if White does not use this juridical term). Such a conception of the defeasibility of common notions, however, also implies that we are justified in relying on notions that come naturally to us, *as long as* no contrary considerations tell us why we have to give them up. This is why common notions can be used to eliminate certain philosophical hypotheses. Again, White gives a good example of this critical use of common notions when he criticizes the philosophical conception of freedom of the will as freedom in situations in which there is no preference for one of the available options, such that the will alone decides between these options. As he points out, such a philosophical conception clashes with “common sense of humans” since humans can conjecture what someone will do, on the basis of the expectation that humans are motivated by similar reasons in similar situations (White 1642, 397). Evidently, our assumption that usually humans do what they do because they have stronger motivations for one option than for other options is highly successful, so the burden of proof is incumbent upon the proponent of the view that there is something like action without a preponderance of motivations.

This view of common notions as something based on natural cognitive capacities and as something revisable can also be found in Digby. Digby distinguishes “two sorts of language to expresse our notions by it” (TT, 5). One is the language of science, which requires training, often involves metaphors and similitudes, and is often used by speakers “to serve their private turnes” (TT, 5). The other language “belongeth in generall to all mankind, and the simplest person, that can but apprehend and speake sense, is as much iudge of it, as the greatest Doctour in the schools: and in this, the words expresse the thinges properly and plainely, according to the natural conceptions that all people agree in making of them” (TT, 5). But why should ordinary language in scientific matter not simply be replaced by the language of science? The answer is that science uses some basic concepts that also occur in everyday language:

For when any obiect occurreth to our thoughts, we eyther consider the essentiall and fundamentall Being of it; or we referre it to some species of Quantity; or we discover some qualities in it; or we perceive that it doeth, or that it suffereth some thing; or we conceive it in some determinate place, or time, and the like. Of all which, every man living that enioyeth but the use of reason, findeth naturally within himself at the very first naming of them, a plaine, complete, and satisfying notion; which is the same without any the least variation, in all mankind … (TT, 5)

As in Gassendi and White, Digby’s common notions are revisable. For instance, Digby formulates the maxim “Philosophers ought not to judge by the same rules that the common people do” (TT, 48). One example for the application of this maxim is Digby’s treatment of fire: Since common people form different notions where they experience different effects, they do not regard fire as the cause of phenomena that do not involve perceptible heat. Contrary to this common notion, Digby gives reasons for why fire sometimes can be active without burning (in his view, due to the conception of rarity fire can be dilated to such a degree that it cannot burn dense fuel), which is why he believes that the ordinary conception of fire has to be revised (TT, 48–49). Note, however, that Digby’s argument for the revision of one ordinary conception is based on the concepts of rarity and density, which (as will become clear in section 4) he regards as common notions themselves. And in this sense, the maxim that advises the philosopher not to judge by the same rules as common people is compatible with Digby’s view that the learned “should refine, and vary higher; not contradict and destroy the notions of mankind, in those thinges that it is the competent Iudge of: as it undoubtedly is, of those primary notions which Aristotle hath ranked under ten heads …: and the worke of schollers, is to explicate them in particular, and not to make the vulgar believe they are mistaken, in framing those apprehensions that nature taught them” (TT, 33). Or to put it in a nutshell: common notions should be revised once we realize that they lead into epistemic trouble; but as long as there is no indication of such trouble, we should rely on them. In this sense, Digby shares the basic features of the Epicurean conception of common notions.

By contrast, Leibniz derives his interest in notions that are expressed in common usage from the work of Renaissance logicians such as Mario Nizolio (1488–ca. 1567) and Bartolomeo Viotti (d. 1568) (on Leibniz’s reading of Nizolio, see Leduc, 2006/2007; Pécharman, 2017). To be sure, at the very beginning of his philosophical career Leibniz held that propositions of metaphysics are *purely* hypothetical. As marginal notes that he wrote around 1663–1664 in his personal copy of Daniel Stahl’s *Metaphysical* *Compendium* show, Leibniz regarded this as a common view shared by Thomas Hobbes (1588–1679) and Honoré Fabri (1608–1688) (A VI, 1, 22). However, a more complex view of the nature of metaphysical concepts is expressed already in the *Dissertation on the Art of Combinations* (1666). The whole enterprise of a universal characteristic is portrayed there not only as something that aims at the production of discourse, but also (and primarily) as something that rests on an adequate analysis of the categorial structure of our language. For instance, when he discusses the combinatorics developed by Ramón Lull (1232–1316), Leibniz expresses disappointment about the concrete terms that Lull has chosen to represent the simple, most basic concepts. As Leibniz complains, Lull’s “method is directed more at the art of extemporaneous discourse than at the pursuit of full knowledge of a given subject … He determines the number of terms arbitrarily …” (A VI, 1, 193). This remark seems to imply that, in Leibniz’s view, the number of terms denoting simple concepts cannot be arbitrary if these concepts are meant to express the fundamental characteristic of the subjects to which they apply. Clearly, such a line of criticism makes sense only under the assumption that there is a non-arbitrary categorial structure to human thought, a structure mirroring the structure of reality.

Leibniz’s own intent to provide a methodological basis for metaphysical concepts that goes beyond the merely rhetorical use of terms is supplemented in the *Preface to Nizolius* (1670) by an analogous view of the nature of logical principles. As he maintains, these principles “are not the principles of philosophy, or of the propositions themselves, and they do not make the truth of things, but rather show it; nevertheless, they make the philosopher, and are the principles of the right way of doing philosophy, which—as Nizolius has observed—is enough” (A VI, 2, 408; on Nizolius’s metaphilosophical views, see Marras & Varani, 2004; Nauta, 2012). One conclusion that Leibniz draws from these considerations concerns philosophical style: “[I]t is very true that there is nothing that cannot be explicated in popular terms, only using more of them” (A VI, 2, 413). However, this claim about philosophical style is a corollary to a claim about the nature of philosophy: “[P]hilosophers do not always surpass common men in that they sense different things, but in that they sense them in a different way, that is with the mind’s eye, with reflection or attention, and comparing things with other things” (A VI, 2, 413).

Although the example of “comparing things with other things” mentioned at this place concerns Joachim Jungius’s attempt at classifying insects through a comparison of their external features (A VI, 2, 413), the point Leibniz has in mind here seems to be more general. The function of comparing things with each other in this context is not that of arriving at empirical generalisations based on an inductive procedure. Rather, using a comparative method leads to an insight into a conceptual structure that, in principle, is accessible to everyone who is willing to invest attention. There are thus different ways of access to these commonly shared contents, but even those who do not reflect upon them do actually possess them. Leibniz’s argument for this claim points toward the contents expressed in ordinary language: “[M]ost of thedialectical and metaphysical matters themselves occur frequentlyeven in popular speeches, writings, and thoughts, and are used everywhere in normal life. This is why people, guidedby this frequent occurrence, have designated them by specific,common, most natural and comprehensive words …” (A VI, 2, 415). In the sense that ordinary people understand the relevant words, they have some insight into the subject matters of logic and metaphysics, and it is this commonly shared pre-reflective insight that makes reflection upon logical and metaphysical issues possible.

Leibniz’s conception of the starting point of philosophical analysis can well be understood in his response to Hermann Conring’s preface to the centenary edition of Bartolomeo Viotti's *On Demonstration* (1560). Viotti gives the following account of how knowledge of definitions that serve as the starting point of definitions can be acquired:

There is a paved and easy way open for us, on which we get to the essential definition: this is by means of the term associated with the given concept. When, e.g., you want to investigate the essence of pulse or fever, it is necessary to begin with the term in order to grasp the concept all human beings have of pulse ... The interpretation of the term brings all accidents to light, from the knowledge of which we proceed to the knowledge of the substance & nature of the thing ... Insofar as you by examining and interpreting the common concept which all human beings have about the term “moon”, you could say that everyone understands by moon some heavenly body which appears at the heavens at some determinate time in the night and illuminates the earth in various forms ... But this I want to be eternal: for investigating essential definitions the mentioned interpretation of terms is a big help. (Viotti, 1560, 141–144)

Likewise, Leibniz contrasts his approach to methodological issues with approaches that work with a theory of proofs that is independent of actual practices and examples:

I have only said what I have found out in this matter through the experience of many years and through the examples of my own reasoning and that of others, and moreover something that is in accordance with what human beings daily do, even if they are not always aware of it, something that is efficient for inventing and judging, and not, as the methods and precepts of some others, sterile and remote from use and example. (A II, 1, 602)

There can thus be little doubt that Digby and Leibniz converge upon a conception of common notions that emphasizes not only the generality but also the commonly shared nature of these concepts. It is time now to examine how Digby and Leibniz put their metaphilosophical views into practice, and how their practice was meant to contribute to their ecumenical uses of natural philosophy. As it turns out, even if Leibniz’s early metaphilosophical views have origins that differ from the origins of Digby’s metaphilosophical views, it is the way in which he applies common notions in the analysis of matter and in the analysis of mind that shows significant similarities with Digby’s argumentative strategy. The task of the next two sections will be to substantiate this claim.

4. Common Notions and the Analysis of Matter

Very much in line with Gassendi’s and White’s conception of common notions, Digby uses common notions as criteria for the evaluation of hypotheses of natural philosophy. He suggests that “we should acquiesce and be content with that naturall and plaine notion, which springeth immediately and primarily from the thing it selfe: which when we do not, the more we seeme to excel in subtility, the further we goe from reality and truth” (TT, 4–5). Of course, Digby faces the difficulty of how to make such natural notions relevant to philosophy. Indeed, he distinguishes between two kinds of languages. The one “belongeth in generall to all mankind, and the simplest person, that can but apprehend and speake sense, is as much judge of it”; the other language “is understood onely by those that in a particular and expresse manner have beene trained up unto it” (TT, 5). Digby associates this second kind of language in particular with the “Doctours of the Schoole” (TT, 5) as well as with “Geometricians, Astronomers, Carpenters, Masons, and such persons as converse familiarly and frequently with those thinges” (TT, 5–6). According to Digby, categorial concepts such as “quantity” do not belong to the technical vocabulary of specialists but rather are part of ordinary language. And, as he points out, “to understand the other kind of plaine language, we must observe how the wordes that compose it are apprehended, used, and applied by mankind in generall” (TT, 6).

Concerning quantity, Digby writes that “if we ayme at right understanding the true nature of it, we must examine, what apprehension all kindes of people (that is mankind in generall) maketh of it” (TT, 8). As he qualifies, the aim of applying common notions is not to enable people who lack a scientific background to judge physical principles concerning quantity, such as the principle of the conservation of quantity. Rather, the aim is to make common people judge “the naturall notion which serveth learned men for a basis and foundation to build scientificall superstructures upon” (TT, 8). Digby formulates the assertion that common notions function as a basis for scientific theories as a claim about how scientific concepts acquire content. There is thus a descriptive aspect and a prescriptive aspect to Digby’s conception of common notions: The descriptive aspect concerns analyzing concepts that common people always use; the prescriptive aspect concerns the evaluation of scientific hypotheses from the perspective of common notions. Both aspects are brought together when Digby concludes: “It is the indisciplined multitude that must furnish learned men with naturall apprehensions and notions to exercise theire wittes about” (TT, 8). Because they confer content to theoretical concepts, common notions also function as criteria for adequate theory formation—as Digby points out, they function as the “norm of discourse” (*norma loquendi*) (TT, 8). Digby applies this strategy from the very beginning of the *Two Treatises*, when he opens the first chapter as follows: “In delivering any science; the cleerest and smoothest methode, and most agreeable to nature; is to begin with the consideration of those things, that are most common and obvious” (TT, 1). In particular, he points out that when thinking about body, “the first thing which occurreth to our sense in the perusal of it, is its *Quantity*, bulke, or magnitude: and this seemeth by all mankind, to be conceived *. . .* inseparable from a body” (TT, 1). Moreover, Digby ascribes an analogous methodological outlook to Lucretius, “who studying nature in a familiar and rationall manner telleth us” that except for bodies no other things are capable of touching and being touched (TT, 1). Thereby, not only the aspects that Digby finds acceptable in the Aristotelian tradition but also the aspects that he finds attractive in the Epicurean corpuscularianism follow the criterion of being compatible with common notions.

Digby illustrates his conception of common notions with the concept of being in a place. As he claims, this concept is “the same in all men living” (TT, 6). “[A]ske any simple artisan; Where such a man, such a howse *. . .* is; *. . .* he will tell you, the man you aske for, is in such a church, sitting in such piew, and in such a corner of it; that the howse you enquire after, is in such a streete, and next to such two buildings on each side of it” (TT, 6). Digby takes these answers to indicate that the concept of being in a place, for all human beings, naturally is the concept of “a bodies being environed and enclosed by some one, or severall others that are immediate unto it” (TT, 6). To put it differently: According to Digby, a relational concept of place is the natural concept common to all human beings. And, as he points out, deviating in the construction of philosophical theories from the original sense of concepts in which all mankind agrees is “the cause of greate errors in discourse” (TT, 6), as for example in the Scholastic debate about the location of angels (TT, 7).

Digby applies the normative aspect of his conception of common notions to the concept of quantity. He writes:

If then any one be asked; what Quantity there is in such a thing, or how greate it is; he will presently in his understanding compare it with some other thing, (equally known by both parties) that may serve for a measure unto it; and the answere, that it is as bigge as it, or twice as bigge, or not half so bigge, or the like *. . .* Which answere, every man living will at the instant, without study, make to this question; and with it every man that shall aske, will be fully appayed and satisfyed: so that it is most evident, it fully expresseth the notions of them both, and of all mankind, in this particular. (TT, 9)

Digby holds that the common notion of quantity is nothing but the extension of a thing, “expressed by a determinate number of lesser extensions of the same nature,” such that “the whole by comprehending those partes, is a meere capacity to be divided into them” (TT, 9). He concludes that quantity is nothing but divisibility (TT, 9). In this sense, the conception of quantity as divisibility is meant as an explication of our everyday concept of quantity.

Digby argues that the distinction between substance and quantity is also present in our “familiar discourse.” To show this, Digby argues that quantity may be changed while substance remains unchanged (TT, 25). The cases of boiling milk and fermenting wine provide him with striking everyday examples of a change of quantity in an unchanged substance (TT, 25). Thus, in Digby’s view, not only the concept of quantity as divisibility belongs to the realm of common notions, but also the distinction between substance and quantity as well as the independent variability of substance and quantity.

Similarly, central aspects of Leibniz’s view of the nature of matter are founded upon an analysis of our everyday conception of material objects. As he suggests, there are two dimensions in which philosophical hypotheses can be assessed. First, “it is a defect in hypotheses to assume what is unnecessary” (A II, 1, 34)—a point that, in his view, greatly speaks in favor of mechanical explanations of natural phenomena. Second, “those hypotheses are better which are clearer” (A II, 1, 34). Clarity, in turn, is bound to the limits of what the human mind can imagine. On first sight, this idea would seem to make the realm of clarity boundless, but actually, what Leibniz has in mind is to use the limits of imagination to exclude a wide range of hypotheses: “The human mind can in fact imagine nothing other than mind (when it thinks of itself), space, matter, motion, and the things that result from the relations of these terms to each other” (A II, 1, 34). Or to put it differently, restricting permissible hypotheses to mechanical natural philosophy, introspective philosophy of mind, and the logical consequences that can be drawn from the combination of these disciplines excludes the occult properties postulated by many of Leibniz’s contemporaries for the very reason that the nature of such properties is not accessible to imagination. The limits of human imagination thus define the limits of epistemically primitive concepts that could be used in the analysis of matter and mind.

Leibniz applies this strategy of analyzing matter in terms of epistemically primitive concepts when he analyzes the criteria by which we distinguish between bodies and non-bodies. According to his view, these criteria are mass or *antitypia*—the observable tendency of material objects to resist other material objects—together with extension. Of course, this claim raises the question of why only extension and antitypia should be regarded as possessing the required degree of clarity to count as the two basic concepts from which the concepts for other sensible qualities could be derived. Leibniz offers the following chain of reasoning:

Everyone calls body what possesses some sensible quality; yet, most of the sensible qualities can be subtracted from a body, while it still remains a body. For even if a body lacks all color, smell and taste, it is still called a body. Everyone concedes that, for instance, air is a body, even if it is perspicuous and often lacks color, smell and taste; likewise, air is a body, even when it lacks sound. Hence, visible, audible, testable and smelling qualities are rejected as being in the least constitutive of the nature of body. What matters, thus, are tactile qualities. However, first qualities—heat, humidity, dryness and coldness—can each be absent … The other tactile qualities—for instance, smoothness, lightness, tenacity, etc.—are even commonly recognized not be constitutive of the nature of body, because they are called “secondary” qualities, and arise from other qualities that rather are constitutive, and in addition because none of them could not be absent from a body. It remains to indicate a sensible quality that can be attributed to all bodies and only to bodies … And this is hardness or *antitypia* together with extension. For whatever humans just sense to be extended or what they just see …, they not immediately call a body, for they think that sometimes is a mere image and *phantasma*. But what they not only see but touch, that is, in what they find *antitypia*, this is what they call body, while what lacks *antitypia*, they deny that it is a body. In two things both experts and laymen locate the nature of body, in extension and *antitypia* taken together … (A VI, 2, 442–443)

According to this line of reasoning, essential properties of bodies are only those properties that are always found in bodies. But if we go through the vast majority of sensible qualities of bodies, it becomes evident that most of them are absent in some bodies. This is why we are left with extension together with the property of resisting to touch.

A similar line of thought leads Leibniz to the distinction between body and space. Again, Leibniz offers an analysis that is grounded in our immediately accessible thought about body and space:

What men call a *body* must be investigated carefully, for a clear and distinct idea of this gives us access to demonstrations. First of all, men agree that only what is thought of as extended can be called a body ... Men call *space* something which they think is extended but nothing else, unless it be immutable ... However, *space and body are* distinct. For we perceive that we think of space as the same when bodies change, and what we perceive ourselves to be thinking or not thinking we perceive truly. The perception of thought is immediate to the thought itself in the same subject, and so there is no cause of error. Therefore, it is true that we think of space remaining the same when bodies change and that we can think of space without a body which is in it. Now two things are diverse if one can be thought of without the other. Therefore, space and body are diverse. (A VI, 2, 304–305; Leibniz, 1969, 143)

As Leibniz explains, this argument “rests on these two propositions: [1] whatever is perceived clearly and distinctly is possible, and [2] whatever is immediately sensed is true, or whatever the mind perceives within itself, it perceives truly” (A VI, 2, 306; Leibniz, 1969, 144). The second premise guarantees that if we perceive that we can think one concept without thinking the other concept, then we have a veridical experience concerning the concepts that we have. The first premise guarantees that, if the concepts that we experience to have are clear and distinct, then “it is possible for space to remain the same when a body changes” (A VI, 2, 306; Leibniz, 1969, 144). Of course, by itself the argument does not show that space and bodies exist. However, it is meant to show that a natural philosophy that places bodies into a Newtonian contained space is in agreement with our common notions.

Saying that hypotheses in natural philosophy are in agreement with common notions, however, does not mean that they are *restricted* to what our common notions tell us. This becomes clear when Leibniz argues for the need of introducing immaterial beings into his conception of the natural world. Still, in Leibniz’s view, a commitment to immaterial beings in nature is itself motivated by theoretical troubles caused by our common notion of matter. These troubles arise from the insight that restricting the essential qualities of matter to extension and antitypia makes matter something purely passive. Starting from the definition of body as what is in space, Leibniz realizes that from this definition no explanation for the determinate figure and magnitude of bodies, as well as for their motion and cohesion can be derived (A VI, 1, 490). Evidently, from the idea of having extension it does not follow why a body has this particular extension; and the idea of extension itself does not seem to involve any dynamical properties required to explain why a body moves with the direction and speed it has and why its parts move together, without falling apart. For this reason, Leibniz forms the hypothesis of an incorporeal being as an origin of motion; due to the harmony among the motions of different bodies, he is led to surmise that there is only a single such being; moreover, since otherwise no sufficient reason for the determinate figure, magnitude and motion of bodies could be given, he assumes that this single being is intelligent—which is to say, it is God (A VI, 1, 492).

Evidently, in Digby’s treatise there is no parallel to Leibniz’s argumentative move from the properties of matter to the role of God as cause of motion and shape. Digby does not have any need for such a hypothesis because, unlike Leibniz, he ascribes to matter a limited range of active properties. For instance, he ascribes to rare bodies a greater active power than to dense bodies. As he argues, they have such greater active powers because they are more easily divisible into small parts and therefore can fill more easily the pores of other bodies (TT, 23). If so, the active qualities such as heat and coldness in less dense bodies can be transmitted more easily to other bodies than the same qualities in denser bodies; this is why less dense bodies are more active than denser ones (TT, 29). In a similar way, he ascribes to the element of fire the active powers that show themselves in three ways: by causing motion, by converting the greatest part of the fuel into its own nature, and by producing a residue such as ashes (TT, 36). As Digby explains these processes: “All which proceedeth from the exceeding smallnesse and drynesse of the partes of fire; which being moved with violence against the fewell, and thronging in multitudes upon it; they easily pierce the porous substance of it, like so many extreme sharpe needles” (TT, 36). In these cases, complex active properties of bodies are described as depending on a combination of their size, shape and more basic active qualities.

The divergence between Digby’s Aristotelian conception of place as an essentially relational entity (TT, 41) and Leibniz’s early adoption of a theory of a container space is not a minor difference between the two thinkers. Still, in their matter theories Digby and Leibniz have two argumentative strategies in common: (1) They use common notions to eliminate hypotheses in natural philosophy that violate criteria of intelligibility; and (2) they use common notion to show why their preferred accounts of the basic properties of matter could be accepted by everyone. The point of choosing such an argumentative strategy, however, does not become clear without examining the role that common notions play in their accounts of the human mind. Only taken together, their analysis of matter and their analysis of mind can provide a rational argument for the immortality of the soul acceptable to atheists and members of different Christian confessions alike.

5. Common Notions and the Analysis of Mind

Digby and Leibniz argue for the immortality of the human soul by drawing a line between phenomena that can be explained through the epistemically primitive concepts that underlie matter theory and phenomena that cannot be explained in this way. They do not draw this line in the same way since Digby allows to non-human animals a wide range of cognitive abilities while the early Leibniz denies to non-human animals any such abilities (Busche, 1994). However, Digby and Leibniz agree that a variety of operations of the human soul cannot be explained through the supposed basic properties of matter. And they share the view that if the immaterial nature of the human soul has been demonstrated, not much else is needed to argue for its natural immortality. This is so because they analyze all known kinds of corruption as processes that take place in complex bodies: the change of the proportions between their elementary qualities and the motions of parts that leads ultimately to the dissolution of the composite (TT, 417–418; A II, 1, 174–175; 181). If mental operations cannot be brought forth by material composites, then these processes of decay cannot take place in the soul (TT, 418; A VI, 1, 493). Moreover, Digby argues, in the realm of thought there are no contraries that lead to destruction—all there can be is a change of thoughts (TT, 418). Similarly, Leibniz argues that immaterial beings are compossible with all other beings and possible in themselves—hence, there are no external or internal factors that could extinguish them (A VI, 3, 581–582). No matter how much our thoughts change, these thoughts are always accompanied by the mind’s sense of itself; this is why Leibniz holds that the identity of the mind cannot be destroyed through any of its modifications (A VI, 3, 509; PDSR 61).

The main argumentative challenge for Digby and Leibniz, therefore, is to show why human souls should be taken to be immaterial entities. To be sure, Digby uses the term “common notion” only once in this context, and Leibniz does not use the term in this context at all. Still, their arguments start from a range of immediately accessible experiences that we make with our mental lives, and in this sense their analyses of mind again draw heavily on notions that are common to all humans. And they contrast their analyses of mind with their analyses of bodies that explicitly draw on common notions.

To draw the line between cognitive capacities that could be explained by the properties of matter and those that cannot, Digby discusses the limits of animal cognition. He develops this discussion in the context of his conception of living beings as of compound unities that departs markedly from other biological views in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries because it does not invoke the agency of vegetative and sensitive souls. Instead of invoking an immaterial principle of activity, Digby explains animal generation and animal self-motion as the interaction of mutually dependent parts of an organic individual (Blank, 2007). According to his view, this interaction in the last analysis reduces to the interaction of particles displaying various proportions of rarity and density. As he argues, memory and learning in animals can be explained within such a framework:

[T]he beating of the hart worketh two thinges: the one is, that it turneth about the species, or litle corporeities (streaming from outward obiects) which remaine in the memory: the other is, that it is alwayes pressing on to some motion or other: out of which it hapeneth, that when the ordinary wayes of getting victuals, or of escaping from enemies, do faile a creature whose constitution is active, it lighteth sometimes … upon doing something, out of which the desired effect followeth: as it can not choose but fall out now and then, although chance only do gouverne their actions: and when their action proueth successfull, it leaueth such an impression in the memory, that whensoeuer the like occasion occurreth, that animal will follow the same methode; for the same species do come together from the memory into the fantasy. (TT, 309)

Digby embraces a theory of composite substances, according to which a nascent organism is a true, individual unity and not only an aggregate of particles of varying rarity and density. He holds that parts of an organism are subordinated under other parts and that, moreover, the parts of the organism are mutually dependent on each other, such that they are destroyed by their separation. Due to the existential dependence between the parts, the composites are genuine individuals:

The bodies of the second sort, have their parts so notably separated out from the other; and each of them have such a peculiar motion proper unto them, that one might conceive they were every one of them a complete distinct totall thing by it self, and that all of them were artificially tied together; were it not that the subordination of these parts to one another is so great, and the correspondence between them so strict, (the one not being able to subsist without the other, from whom he deriveth what is need full for him; and again, being so usefull unto that other, and having its action and motion so fitting and necessary for it, as without it that other cannot be) as plainly convinceth that the compound of all these severall parts must needs be one individuall thing. (TT, 205)

In this way, the mutual dependence between the parts of an animal provides Digby with an account of animal self-motion without invoking an immaterial principle of agency. In his view, animal self-motion reduces to causal relations between mutually dependent parts of an organic whole. Because Digby’s theory of change in animal behavior involves such a “thin” conception of animal self-motion, it fulfils the aim of the first part of the *Two Treatises*: to delineate the powers of matter in such a way that the intellectual capacities of the human beings discussed in the second part of the work necessarily come out as being inexplicable by means of the powers of matter.

For present purposes, let me focus on the issues of reflection and self-knowledge that play also a crucial role in Leibniz’s considerations concerning immortality. As Digby points out, each mental operation is connected with reflexive knowledge of the soul itself: “we find that the soules knowing with evidence that any thing is or hath being, implyeth her knowing that her selfe is; … it is evident that the first truthes which enter into the soule, to witt, that this or that seemeth so or so unto her … are identified with the soule itselfe; seeing that an obiect seeming to be such or such, is nothing else but the soul so qualified” (TT, 405). On first sight, it may seem as if Digby here simply adopts a line of reasoning for the immortality of the mind found in Gassendi (on Gassendi’s conception of the soul, see Michael & Michael, 1988). This impression is not entirely misleading; however, as we shall presently see, Digby offers a significant modification of Gassendi’s argument.

Gassendi maintains that “the kind of reflexive actions, through which the intellect understands itself and its own functions, and in particular remarks that it understands” is the expression of a capacity that goes beyond bodily faculties (Gassendi 1649, 560). This is so, he argues, because whatever is corporeal is at a particular place and can only act upon something that is at a different place. For this reason, he accepts the principle that bodies cannot act upon themselves. As he points out, this principle is confirmed by the structure of bodily faculties: the faculty of seeing, for instance, does not see itself, or know its own vision, or draw attention to the fact that it is seeing. Likewise, the corporeal faculty of phantasy does not perceive its own acts of imagination through phantasy images, nor does it draw attention to the fact that it imagines. Consequently, when we draw attention to our acts of seeing and imagining, this must be the expression of a capacity that differs from bodily faculties (Gassendi 1649, 560). Gassendi concedes that it may look as if brutes also have a kind of reflection, for instance, when they hesitate and return. However, very much like Digby, Gassendi offers a reductionist account of such behavioral patterns. In his view, all that is needed to explain them is the occurrence of new sensible species that trigger some reminiscence (Gassendi 1649, 561). For Gassendi, while the organism that receives sensible species remains passive with respect to these species, reflection indicates the presence of an internal principle of activity.

Digby’s argument seems to be more complex since he takes the phenomenon of reflection itself to be explicable by physiological factors. With respect to remembering, he conjectures that “it appeareth to be nothing else, but the promptitude and recourse of some spirits, that are proper for this effect” (TT, 390). This analysis of remembering is fully compatible with Gassendi’s analysis. However, contrary to Gassendi, Digby understands reflection in analogy with remembering:

[T]he very Reflexion it selfe, which we make upon our thoughts, seemeth unto me to be only this, that the obiect beating upon the fansie, carryeth backe with it at its retiring from thence, some litle particle or atome of the braine … [B]ut whensoever it is called for againe by the fansie, or upon any other occasion returneth thither, it cometh as it were capped with this additional piece it acquired formerly in the fansie; and so maketh a representation of its own having been formerly there. (TT, 391).

If so, then reflection itself could be explained by corporeal processes. Still, Digby argues that such bodily processes could explain only an occurrence of reflection by chance. However, there are two aspects of reflective knowledge that cannot be explained by such chance processes. The first is our capacity of integrating reflective knowledge—as Digby does in the second treatise—into an ordered discourse. Such an “ordering of thoughts”, Digby argues, is “an operation feasible only by rational creatures” (TT, 391). The second is our capacity of using reflection to form negative judgments. As he describes it, “[t]he way … that the soule taketh in this operation, is, that comparing two thinges together, and finding that the one of them is not the other; she reflecteth upon her owne action, and dividing in it the thing said, from the saying, she taketh the thing said for a quality, or property, or predicate … of that thing which she denyeth to be the other” (TT, 402). Such judgments cannot be explained through impressions made by sensible species alone; rather, they “do argue an admirable power in the soule, and of a quite different straine from all corporeall thinges … since it is most cleare, that something can not be like Nothing, and that there can not be a participation of what is not; how can we conceive that there should be a similitude made of *Nothing*?” (TT, 401-402). Since neither negation nor the concept ‘nothing’ can arise alone from the interaction between rare and dense particles that accounts for the cognitive lives of brutes, the human soul must have active powers that only an immaterial entity can have.

Some of Leibniz’s arguments for the immateriality of the human soul are closely analogous to Digby’s arguments. To be sure, Leibniz does not have to struggle with the problem of reflection in brutes because he does not allow them any cognitive capacities. But as to the cognitive capacities of humans, the analysis of reflection plays an even more central role for Leibniz than it does for Digby. Leibniz points out the following connection between the capacity of comparison and the capacity of reflection:

Every body is … a momentary mind, or one that lacks *memory*, because it does not retain for more than a moment its own striving and an alien one contrary to it (two factors, action and reaction, or the comparison and therefore *harmony*, are required for *sense*, and—without which there is no sense—for *lust* or pain): therefore it lacks memory, it lacks the sense of its own actions and passions, it lacks thought. (A VI, 2, 266)

This dense passage gives the following picture of mental activities: Sensation requires the comparison between mental states. Comparison between mental states, in turn, requires the capacity to retain memories of the mental states compared (see Blank, 2009). Moreover, having sensations involves experiencing this process of comparing mental states as pleasant or painful. Retaining previous mental states in memory, comparing them, and experiencing them as pleasant or painful implies that sensation involves some higher-order mental operations—operations that have the “actions and passions” of the mind as its object. In this sense, sensation involves a sense of the mind’s own actions and passions. And it is this structure of reflexive mental operations that Leibniz has in mind when he speaks of “thought.” Accordingly, Leibniz understands thought as “action on itself” and sensation as a particular kind of such immanent action (A VI, 2, 493). Similarly, he writes: “Whatever acts on itself, has some memory (for we *remember* when we sense that we have sensed); and consequently, the perception of harmony or disharmony or of lust or pain, through the comparison of an old and a new sensory impression …” (A VI, 1, 483).

It has to be said that in Leibniz’s early writings the nature of the first-order mental operations that are the object of higher-order mental operations is undertheorized. When he characterizes thought as “perception with reflection”, the implication seems to be that the first-order operations can be characterized as a kind of perception. However, a detailed discussion of the nature of perceptions that require some higher-order activities to lead to noticeable impressions is only found in the writings from Leibniz’s middle and later years (see Blank 2000). All that can be found in his early writings is the consideration that what we experience presupposes the existence of such perceptions that are not sensible in themselves. For instance, in another early piece Leibniz writes:

Thought is nothing but the sense of comparison, or shorter, the sense of many at once, or one in many.

It is necessary that in the possible contents of thought there is a reason why they are sensed, i.e. why they exist, and this is not in the thought of single things, it is therefore in a plurality. Therefore, in all. Therefore, in the mind, i.e. in one in many. Therefore, in harmony, i.e. the unity of a plurality, or in a diversity compen­sated by identity. (A VI, 2, 282)

This passage provides a reason why sensation requires the comparison of mental states: a single mental state would not give rise to the complex contents of our sensations; hence, sensations must arise out of processing a plurality of mental states that are not sensations themselves.

What is more, in the passage just cited, the capacity of comparing mental states is linked with the view that minds are genuine unities. What is it about mental activities involving higher-order operations that makes minds genuine unities? Leibniz explicates the notion of unity characteristic of a multiplicity—such as the multiplicity of thoughts in every mind—through the notion of connection. Leibniz’s technical notion of connection has both an epistemological and an ontological side. As to the epistemological side, Leibniz explains, “Connected are two things of which one cannot be understood without the other” (A VI, 3, 515). Thus, connection has to do with the intelligibility of the things that are said to be connected: two things are connected when one of them cannot be understood independently of the other, and vice versa. But connection does not reduce to such an epistemological relation. Leibniz writes: “*Connection* is the necessity of the one thing for the other, connected are two things that are mutually required for each other” (A VI, 1, 102). The sense in which things are mutually required for each other becomes clearer in the following definition: “Connected are two things when the existence of the one is involved in the existence of the other” (A VI, 4, 2769). Hence, connection in Leibniz’s technical sense is a relation of existential dependence: two things are connected when one cannot exist without the other, and vice versa. Most importantly for present purposes, Leibniz maintains that two things that are connected form a genuine unity: “*Several things that are connected are one individual*. For given A and B, if A would not exist, also B would not exist, and vice versa” (A VI, 1, 120).

Given Leibniz’s characterization of genuine unity in terms of the connection relation, it is plausible to ask whether the connection relation plays a role in his account of sensation and thought. Clearly, not everything he says when he describes sensation and thought implies that relations of mutual existential dependence obtain between mental activities. Thus, while an operation that has another mental activity as its object depends for its existence on this activity, the reverse does not hold: the mental activity may well exist without being the object of a higher-order operation. Nevertheless, there is at least one aspect of sensation and thought that instantiates a relation of mutual existential dependence. Consider the following passage:

*To think* is being the reason of change, or to change itself. Also being the reason of itself. *To think* is indefinable, in the same way as *to sense*, or rather *to act*. And nevertheless, once assumed they are reflected in themselves. Because *we think*, we know that we are ourselves, because *we act*, [we know] that there is something else. (A VI, 2, 282–283)

Leibniz’s view seems to be the following: sensation, like thought and acting, essentially involve higher-order operations by means of which we are aware of our sensations, thoughts, and actions. But by being aware of our sensations, thoughts, and actions, we are at the same time aware of ourselves (and also of the beings that are presupposed in our actions). The relation between self-awareness and awareness of our sensations and thoughts exemplifies the connection relation since the relation of existential dependence here seems to go in both directions. On the one hand, self-awareness does not occur independently of the awareness of thought. In this sense, self-awareness depends on the awareness involved in thought. On the other hand, our awareness of sensations and thoughts also does not occur independently of self-awareness. If this is what Leibniz has in mind, the structure of thought involves two different kinds of higher-order mental operations—awareness of thought and self-awareness—that stand in the connection relation to each other: awareness of thought cannot exist independently of the self-awareness, and vice versa.

From this perspective, it is not surprising to see that Leibniz connects the issue of the reflexive nature of thought with the question of how we form the notion of unity. He writes:

Extension is a state, thinking is an action … Everything that thinks, thinks something. The simplest thing is that which thinks that it thinks itself …

We perceive many things in our mind, such as thinking or per­ceiving, perceiving oneself, perceiving oneself to be the same, perceiving pleasure and pain …

The idea of existence and of identity does not come from the body, nor does that of unity. (A VI, 3, 518; PDSR 75–77)

Here, Leibniz comes back to the idea that first-order mental activities, higher-order mental activities that have first-order activities as their object, and higher-order activities that have the identical self as their object are distinguishable characteristics of minds. In particular, he uses the phenomenon of self-awareness to explicate the sense in which minds possess simplicity. What is more, he regards the concept of unity, like other metaphysical concepts, as something that we could not derive from our conception of material objects. By implication, he suggests that the concept of unity, like other metaphysical concepts, is something that we could derive from our conception of the structure of mental activities. At the end of the passage just quoted, Leibniz also integrates the ability to understand that something has *not* taken place into the characterization of the mind as an active being: “It is a wonderful thing when the mind remembers negatives or is conscious that it has not thought anything” (A VI, 3, 518; PDSR 77). Like Digby, Leibniz thus regards the ability of forming negations (presupposed by the ability of remembering negations) and the insight into the absence of something (in particular, the insight into not having had a thought) as mental capacities that cannot be explained as arising from the passive properties of matter.

Finally, it may be worth being pointed out that also Digby’s argument from the mind’s ordering powers has analogies in Leibniz. Digby does not restrict the ordering power to the mind’s capacity to order the chance occurrences of reflexive self-awareness. Rather, he regards this capacity as one example of a much more pervasive feature of our mental life. For instance, the ordering power expresses itself in our ability to produce speech. For instance, we follow the rules of an art such as poetry when we write a poem and we do so even when we do not make any conscious application of rules of grammar and style. That we nevertheless follow such rules becomes clear when we notice that we have made mistakes that violates the rule of prosody (TT, 408). Digby takes this phenomenon to indicate that what is operative here is nothing that could be explained by material imagination images and, therefore, has to flow from an immaterial principle (TT, 408). Generally, Digby notes that the ordering power of the mind is presupposed in all of our planful acts of ordering the external world—for instance, the work of an architect can be understood only through the architect’s ability of forming orderly plans (TT, 411). Digby takes this ability to have two implications: (1) the mind must be capable of ordering its own activities; and (2) the mind must be capable of communicating order upon the external world (TT, 412). In both respects, the mind turns out to be a principle of self-motion, since it has an origin of motion in itself (TT, 412). This sets the mind apart from bodies, which are always moved by other bodies (TT, 412).

Leibniz, too, connects the ordering power of the mind with immortality, and he does so in a surprising context—his remarks about dreaming. He sets forth his analysis of the structure of dreaming in a short text that begins with a short paragraph on persuasion. The remarks about persuasion and the remarks about dreaming are not unrelated. Rather, what Leibniz says about persuasion gives a context for what he does in his remarks about dreaming. This conjecture seems to be plausible because the point of the opening remarks concerns the role of attention:

The power of persuading lies sometimes in setting forth reasons, sometimes in arousing affects, and sometimes in what is, as it were, thee vehicle of both, namely, the art of arousing attention … For we do not follow most of what we know, because we do not pay attention while acting. And attention is nothing but reflection. (A VI, 2, 276)

Arguably, the subsequent remarks about the structure of dreams could be read as exemplifying a mode of persuasion based on drawing attention to what everyone knows, even if few people reflect about it. In fact, Leibniz draws attention to features of our mental lives with which we all are acquainted, namely, some differences between the state of being awake and the state of dreaming. He points out that “[b]eing asleep differs from being awake insofar as in being awake everything at least implicitly is directed toward an ultimate goal … From this it comes about that to wake up is nothing but to recollect oneself … To being to connect the state in which you are presently with the rest of your life, or yourself with yourself” (A VI, 2, 276). Thus, as far as the goal-directedness of mental activity in the state of being awake is concerned, dreaming amounts to a rupture of the connection of mental activities. Yet, Leibniz maintains that there is a different kind of connection between mental activities in the state of dreaming:

However, it should be noted that the sleeping person at times becomes aware of the fact that she is asleep, and that she nevertheless continues to sleep. Here, we should consider the fact that someone wakes up for a very small interval of time and, once again asleep resumes the previous mental image. But it should also be noted that some human beings can wake up themselves, and this is very familiar to myself, such that when I am oppressed by some unwelcome image, I recall that I am asleep, and I try to open my eyes … it should also be considered from where leaps out of bed arise … which occur to some people sometimes at the border between being awake and being asleep … When this happened to me once, I was unable to fall asleep again during the whole night. For as soon as I was about to fall asleep, I recollected myself and had a feeling of this and jumped up. (A VI, 2, 276)

The kind of connection described here indicates that there is a kind of reflective awareness of the state of sleeping and the situation of falling asleep, in Leibniz’s view, has implications for the nature of the mind. He also notes that the way in which dream images are related to previous experiences is traditionally related to the question of the immortality of the soul:

One thing is most admirable in dream, … namely the formation of images, which happens by a spontaneous concourse in a moment … This example is well-known: “hac sunt in fossa Bedae *Venerabilis* ossa,” which a poetic monk substituted in a dream for the unsuitable word “presbyteri.” It is notable that Colomiès, in his *Small Writings*, refers to the poem of the dreaming Gaulmine as pertaining to the immortality of the soul. (A VI, 2, 277)

Replacing the generic characterization of Beda as a priest by the epithet by which he was to be remembered by posterity presupposes great familiarity with how such commemorative verses work. Hence, if such a replacement can take place while dreaming, this is the indication of the presence of complex active powers of the mind even during sleep. Generally, Leibniz argues that the connection between mental activities in dreaming implies that in mind there is an internal principle of action, which is not explicable by the momentary *conatus* as it occurs in bodies (A VI, 2, 277). Moreover, his claims about the active nature of mind are seen as being implied by observations that are common to all humans:

I do not believe that there is anyone among the mortals who would not confess to me that while dreaming there occur spontaneously … elegant and artfully fabricated images … hence, necessarily there is something I know not what in our mind that is constructive [*architectans*] and harmonious, which as soon as it is liberated from disentangling ideas turns to joining them together. (A VI, 2, 278)

The phenomena occurring in dreams provides Leibniz with another argument for the active and hence immaterial nature of mind. In this sense, in the *Outline of Catholic Demonstrations*, Leibniz mentions that the third chapter of the part that was intended to give a proof for the immortality of the soul would argue specifically “from the wonderful connectedness of dreams”—an argument that was meant to supplement the arguments derived from Digby (A VI, 1, 494-495). And in a note to this passage, Leibniz also mentions specifically Gaulmine’s dream (A VI, 1, 495, notes). Leibniz thus understood the immortality argument from the structure of dreams as a part of his ecumenical program. And clearly, he understood it as an argument that is based on concepts that are common to all humans.

6. Conclusion

Digby’s and Leibniz’s use of natural philosophy in their arguments for the immortality of the soul thus does not follow the dynamics of confessionalization. Their argumentative strategies are not meant to use natural philosophy to consolidate doctrinal *differences* between the various confessions. Rather, they are meant to use natural philosophy to support a theological doctrine that—irrespective of the specifically confessionalized turns that have been given to this doctrine—could, in their view, be accepted by all rational beings (and, hence, by members of different confessions). To achieve this goal, Digby and the early Leibniz use common notions of matter and space as a criterion for finding out which hypotheses in natural philosophy could be commonly acceptable. And they use commonly shared experiences with our mental lives to argue that some mental operations cannot be explained by means of the commonly acceptable hypotheses in matter theory. In this way, Digby and the early Leibniz seek to identify a methodological basis that supports religious beliefs that could become part of a common theology. The analogies between Digby’s and Leibniz’s argumentative strategies explain why Leibniz did not only regard his own projected proofs for the immortality of the soul to be complementary to Digby’s but also regarded Digby’s immortality proofs to be something that could be integrated into his own ecumenical stance.

These significant parallels between Digby and the early Leibniz should not obscure that their views diverge in many matters of detail. As we have seen, there are disagreements between Digby and Leibniz over the nature of space, over whether or not matter possesses active qualities, and over animal cognition. Also, while Digby’s conjectures that souls remain in an immutable state after the death of the human body, Leibniz conjectures that the soul is always remains conjoined with a subtle body that he calls the “kernel of substance” (Blank 2005, ch. 4). Do these divergences amount to a refutation of using common notions in the analysis of matter and the analysis of mind? I do not think so. First, none of these differences derives from confessional differences. In this sense, these differences do not undermine the ecumenical goal of using common notions. Second, as to matter theory, common notions are meant to provide only a frame for formulating hypotheses—hence, diverging hypotheses are permissible. In this sense, the differences between Digby and Leibniz do not undermine the methodological purpose of common notions. There may be other criteria for evaluating these hypotheses such as the criteria specified by Leibniz—coherence, explanatory power, and the absence of superfluous ontological assumptions. But even if more criteria may be needed, common notions contribute to excluding philosophical hypotheses that do not meet the criterion of intelligibility in terms of clear and distinct concepts and to taking into consideration only hypotheses that meet these criteria.

Third, the divergence over animal cognition is not in tension with a substantial convergence over the analysis of the powers of the human mind. This is so because what Digby and Leibniz say about the question of cognitive capacities of beasts is part of their hypothetical matter theories. Since their hypotheses concerning the basic properties of matter diverge when it comes to active powers, they reach diverging conclusions concerning the mental life of brutes. Still, Digby and Leibniz share the view that some structural features of the mind—in particular, reflection, self-knowledge and capacities of ordering—are accessible by becoming attentive to commonly shared mental experiences. Unlike in the case of matter theory, describing these experiences is meant to be an entirely non-hypothetical enterprise. While some divergence as to matter theory is thus compatible with using common notions as criteria for the formation of hypotheses, the notions deriving from the analysis of mind thus describe features of mental activities that are the same in everyone. And if these commonly shared features of mental activities cannot be explained by matter theories that meet the criteria of intelligibility set by our common notions, then the theological doctrine of the immortality of human souls turns out to be acceptable for everyone who accepts common notions as criteria of theory formation.

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