

Leibniz and Prime Matter

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ABSTRACT I argue that the prime matter that Leibniz posits in every created monad is understood by him to be a mere defect or negation, and not something real and positive. Further, I argue that Leibniz's talk of prime matter in every created monad is inspired by the thirteenth-century doctrine of spiritual matter, but that such talk is simply one way in which Leibniz frames a point that he frequently makes elsewhere—namely, that each creaturely essence incorporates a limitation that is the ultimate source of an original imperfection that affects the creature from the first moment of its existence.

KEYWORDS Leibniz, Aristotelianism, prime matter, original imperfection, universal hylomorphism, Thomas Aquinas, Bonaventure

I. INTRODUCTION

ONE OF THE MORE DIFFICULT PROBLEMS that arise in the interpretation of Leibniz concerns his use of Aristotelian terminology. Leibniz, after all, frequently uses expressions like 'prime matter,' 'substantial form,' and 'entelechy,' and the fact that he does so raises the question of how seriously we should take his use of such terms. This question, however, would seem to admit of no easy answer. For the fact that Leibniz is, by his own admission, willing to tailor his terminology to his intended audience might be thought good reason to be skeptical about claims to the effect that his use of Aristotelian terminology is evidence of some genuinely Aristotelian commitments on his part.¹ If, moreover, we overcome whatever hesitations we might feel here and decide to take Leibniz's use of Aristotelian terminology seriously, and this in such a way that we think it profitable to try to understand his thought by appeal to the doctrines of his Aristotelian contemporaries and predecessors, we are faced with the question of which scholastic philosopher or

¹Regarding Leibniz's willingness to tailor his terminology to his audience, see, for example, A 3.7.944/AG 169. Here Leibniz writes to Johann Bernoulli, "I completely approve of your advice, that among Cartesians and the like, we should abstain from mentioning primary matter and substantial form, and be satisfied with mentioning mass, that is, something *per se* passive, and entelechy, that is, a primitive activity, soul, life."

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philosophers we should look to for elucidations of Leibniz's conception of (say) substantial form. After all, philosophers working in the Aristotelian tradition were hardly unanimous in their conception of such forms. Thomas Aquinas (1225–74), for example, held that there is only one substantial form in a corporeal substance; Richard of Middleton (ca. 1249–1302/3), by contrast, held that every corporeal substance contains a plurality of substantial forms.²

Notwithstanding all this, I would like to suggest that there is at least one ostensibly Aristotelian notion in Leibniz that we can gain some insight into by looking to his Aristotelian predecessors for help. The notion I have in mind is Leibniz's conception of prime matter, understood as something that combines with a first entelechy or primitive active force in order to yield a monad or simple substance.³ Leibniz, of course, has a number of things to say about this prime matter. He identifies it with the primitive passive power of the monad (GP II.252/AG 177 or LDV 265).⁴ He characterizes it as a principle of resistance and as a first subject or substrate (GP II.306/LDB 35). He claims that it is an aspect or metaphysical component of all and only created monads, that is, of every monad save God (GP II.325/LDB 79). And he implies, in no uncertain terms, that the prime matter of a monad serves both as a principle of the natural inertia characteristic of bodies and as a principle of the confusion that is invariably found in a created monad's perceptions.⁵

Nonetheless, scholars are left with many things to puzzle about regarding Leibniz's notion of monadic prime matter. I will confine myself here to mentioning two. First, Leibniz's attribution of prime matter to what were once called spiritual substances is liable to cause surprise. Indeed, although scholars of ancient philosophy are today divided on the question of whether Aristotle himself recognized anything like prime matter,⁶ they are unanimous in holding that he denied any sort of hylomorphic composition in the souls of human beings or in the unmoved movers of the heavenly spheres (which were sometimes identified with the angels of the Christian religion). Further, most, if not all, scholastics

²On the medieval debate regarding the plurality of forms, see Zavalloni, *Richard de Mediavilla*.

³I am in no way concerned to deny that Leibniz sometimes uses the expression '*materia prima*' or its French equivalent to refer to something that belongs to a body or corporeal substance. (He clearly does; see, for example, GP VII.529, written in 1710.) Nor am I concerned with the question of what exactly Leibniz means by '*materia prima*' when he uses it in this way. I am concerned solely with the prime matter that is said to figure in a monad, which I, together with the majority of Leibniz's interpreters, take to be a soul-like simple substance. Not everyone will agree that there are two different things that Leibniz calls "prime matter," one of which is conceived to belong to corporeal substances while the other is conceived to belong to monads. For example, Pauline Phemister (*Leibniz and the Natural World*, 18) denies that Leibniz's monad is a soul-like substance and holds that it is instead a corporeal substance. But this is an issue that I cannot get into here.

⁴See also GP II.306/LDB 35; GP II.324/LDB 79; GP II.368/LDB 119; GP II.371/LDB 127. Leibniz sometimes also uses the expressions '*vis primitiva patiendi*,' '*puissance primitive passive*,' and 'τὸ δυναμικὸν πρῶτον παθητικόν.'

⁵Arguments for this claim are given in the next section.

⁶William Charleton and Mary Louise Gill have both challenged the claim that Aristotle recognizes a substrate common to the four sublunary elements. See the appendix in Charleton, *Physics*; see also Gill, *Aristotle on Substance*, ch. 2 and appendix.

after Scotus (1265/6–1308) understood spiritual substances to be pure subsistent forms—that is to say, forms that, unlike natural or material forms, do not, or need not, exist in any sort of material substrate in order to exist at all.

Second, there is also the problem of Leibniz's motivations for positing prime matter as a component of simple substances, given his view that no created substance has any causal influence over any other. As Burchard de Volder remarks in a letter to Leibniz, the need to posit a principle of resistance in a substance is far from obvious. For since, according to Leibniz, "the substance cannot be made to undergo something by any other substance [*a nulla pati possit alia*], this resistance will serve to do nothing but resist its own active force" (GP II.255/LDV 273). Substantially the same criticism has been offered in our own day by Martha Kneale and James McGuire: both find something deeply problematic about the claim that a substance contains a component that seems capable of doing little else but resisting, and even frustrating, that substance's own activity.⁷

Of these two problems, the first, I think, provides us with a clue in the search for a better understanding of monadic prime matter in Leibniz. For although most scholastic Aristotelians denied any sort of hylomorphic composition in angels and the rational soul, some of them asserted that these spiritual substances are indeed composed of matter and form. In fact, one of the great philosophical debates of the thirteenth century concerned the doctrine of spiritual matter, or what has come to be known as the doctrine of universal hylomorphism. Proponents of universal hylomorphism claimed that *all* created substances, spiritual ones no less than corporeal ones, contain matter, and that God alone is absolutely simple and immaterial. Of course, they also denied that the mere presence of matter in a creature rendered that creature extended or corporeal.

All of this is important, I think, although it is not my intention here to argue that Leibniz subscribed to the doctrine of universal hylomorphism. The situation is rather more complicated than that. Indeed, following a suggestion made by Robert Adams,⁸ I shall be arguing here that Leibniz's talk of prime matter in monads should not be understood to involve a commitment to some real and positive element in every created monad that stands alongside its entelechy or active force. On the view to be argued for in this paper, rather, the prime matter of a monad is conceived by Leibniz to be a privation or negation.⁹ For this reason it would be false to say that Leibniz endorsed the doctrine of universal hylomorphism, since proponents of this doctrine held that prime matter was not nothing, even if they granted so little reality or actuality to it that they frequently called it *prope nihil*—i.e. *nearly* nothing. On my view, the thirteenth-century debate regarding spiritual matter is relevant, instead, because it helps to make sense of a second claim that I am concerned to argue for here, which is that Leibniz's talk of prime matter as a component of simple substances is merely one way in which he frames a point

⁷See McGuire, "Labyrinthus Continui," 322; and Kneale, "Leibniz and Spinoza on Activity," 224.

⁸Adams, *Idealist*, 394.

⁹Leibniz generally uses the terms 'negation' and 'privation' interchangeably. That is, he does not reserve the term 'privation' to refer to the defect or lack of a *due* good, but uses it to refer generally to any defect of goodness or reality.

that he often makes elsewhere—namely, that a creaturely essence is something that (i) limits the creature's capacity for perfection, and so the degree of perfection that God can impart to it, and therefore (ii) serves as the immediate source of the original imperfection or limitation which, according to the *Theodicy*, is found in every creature generally and precedes every sin in rational creatures in particular. For it is quite clear that Leibniz understands the prime matter of a created monad, like its essence, to be a principle of imperfection (and so explanatory of the fact that the created monad lacks the absolute perfection found in God). But there are not, I claim, two different principles of imperfection in the monad, according to Leibniz; there is only one.

This is not to say that Leibniz has one and the same thing in mind when he speaks of prime matter, on the one hand, and the creature's essence, on the other. Rather, I shall argue that, according to Leibniz, a creaturely essence is a principle of imperfection by virtue of its necessarily involving limits, which together constitute, on his view, a privation or negation. And it is *this* privation or negation within the essence of a creature, I claim, that Leibniz has in mind when he speaks of monadic prime matter in some texts. It is also the immediate source of that original imperfection which, according to Leibniz, is found in any creature from the very first moment of its existence. If this is right, it follows that it is a mistake to think of prime matter as something real and positive within the monad that resists and even frustrates the monad's own activity. If the monad lacks some measure of distinctness in most of its perceptions—that is to say, if most of its perceptions are to some degree confused—this is not because of something real and positive in it that resists its drive for greater distinctness in its perceptions; it is due, rather, to a want of greater perfection in the monad itself, this defect having its ultimate source in a privation or negation within the monad's essence.

The thesis that Leibniz casts his claims regarding the imperfection of creatures sometimes in terms of prime matter and sometimes in terms of creaturely essences may strike one as surprising, perhaps even implausible. But it is here, I think, that an understanding of the thirteenth-century debate regarding universal hylomorphism can help us most of all in trying to understand Leibniz's notion of prime matter. For two of the most famous participants in this debate were Aquinas and Bonaventure (ca. 1217–74), and the claim that prime matter is a principle of imperfection in all creatures is found in Bonaventure, a proponent of universal hylomorphism, while the claim that the creaturely essence is a principle of imperfection is found in Aquinas, who denied any sort of hylomorphic composition in angels or rational souls. If we bear in mind Leibniz's philosophical ecumenism, and his tendency to overlook philosophical differences in an effort to find common ground, these facts about Aquinas and Bonaventure, I claim, render Leibniz's willingness to make the same point either in terms of prime matter or in terms of creaturely essences rather more intelligible. Leibniz's own considered view is that a negation or limitation at the heart of every creaturely essence is the ultimate source of its imperfection. But he is happy to make the point either in Bonaventuran terms or in Thomistic terms.

In the next section of this paper, I argue, based on texts drawn entirely from Leibniz's corpus, that his attribution of prime matter to monads is simply one way

in which he presents a claim that is cast elsewhere in terms of creaturely essences and their inherent limitations. In section 3, I will discuss the thirteenth-century debate regarding spiritual matter and discuss the positions adopted by Aquinas and Bonaventure on this issue insofar as they bear on the question of creaturely imperfection as such. In section 4, I offer my conclusions.¹⁰

Before I begin, let me make one note of clarification: if, in what follows, I sometimes speak of how a negation or privation to be found in the essence of a creature is the immediate source of the original imperfection which that creature has from the very first moment of its existence, I should not be taken to be reifying abstractions or unreal things. To say that such a negation is responsible for the creature's original imperfection is, in the context of this essay, simply to say that the creature's essence is a source of this imperfection *precisely insofar as this essence is limited or lacking in some respect*.

2. PRIME MATTER AND CREATURELY ESSENCES

Good evidence can be gleaned from Leibniz's writings for the claim that his attribution of prime matter to created monads is one way in which he frames a point that he elsewhere discusses in terms of creaturely essences and their limited capacity for perfection. It is, to begin with, noteworthy that Leibniz assigns some of the same roles both to monadic prime matter and to the original imperfection of creatures. This, I take it, is significant, even though it is not my intention here to argue that Leibniz understands the prime matter and the original imperfection of a created monad to be one and the same thing. (My claim, rather, is that for Leibniz the original imperfection that a created monad has from the very first moment of its existence is the immediate consequence of its prime matter—i.e. the immediate consequence of a negation within its essence.) For on the interpretation to be argued for here, prime matter and this original imperfection share a number of roles. And this is because, in the case of an actually existing creature, its prime

¹⁰Antognazza, "Primary Matter," likewise argues that for Leibniz prime matter is a negation of being, and not something real and positive. On this important point she and I agree, but our discussions are otherwise very different, both in their concerns and in their conclusions. On her view, for example, Leibniz both adopts Thomas Aquinas's conception of prime matter as lacking any entity of its own and embraces the criticism, offered by Scotus and others, that this conception implies that prime matter is nothing. On my account, Leibniz's indebtedness to Thomas on creaturely limitation is of a rather different kind. I know of no other interpreter who takes the view that monadic prime matter is for Leibniz a negation of being (although Robert Adams seriously entertains the possibility—see Adams, *Idealist*, 394). Paul Lodge, in his introduction to LDV, claims that monadic prime matter both "accounts for the limitation in created simple substances" and limits "the capacity of a monad to make transitions to more distinct representations as it moves through its sequence of perceptions" (lxxxix). But he does not make any claims about what Leibniz takes monadic prime matter itself to be. Hartz (*Leibniz's Final System*) claims that prime matter is responsible for both the finitude of created monads and the "recalcitrance of matter" (190) but, like Lodge, offers no characterization of prime matter itself (as distinguished from its consequences or effects). Garber (*Leibniz: Body, Substance, Monad*) discusses prime matter, understood as something belonging to genuinely extended, corporeal substances, and he has a story to tell about how Leibniz arrived at the notion of monadic prime matter (347–48); but of monadic prime matter itself he has little to say beyond claiming (incorrectly, in my view) that it is "the confused perception of a non-extended substance" (167). Rutherford (*Leibniz and the Rational Order of Nature*) likewise identifies the primary matter of a monad with its confused perceptions (164).

matter (which is a negation) gives rise to all the consequences to which its original imperfection gives rise, *except* that prime matter (which is a negation) *also* gives rise to the original imperfection itself.

What are these roles? Leibniz describes both prime matter and the original imperfection of creatures as the source of the natural inertia found in bodies. He also attributes responsibility for the confusion that invariably exists in a created monad's perceptions both to its prime matter and to its original imperfection. In a couple of texts, moreover, Leibniz's equation of prime matter with a negation at the heart of every creature's essence is made even clearer, as we shall see.

Before presenting evidence for these claims, it is worth taking a look at Leibniz's views regarding creaturely essences and the original imperfections to which creaturely essences, precisely insofar as they are limited, give rise in created substances. Perhaps the first thing to note is that Leibniz often speaks of an original imperfection in every creature that (i) precedes original sin, (ii) has its source in the creature's essence, and (iii) serves to explain how Adam and Eve were liable to sin in the first place (A 6.4.1577/AG 62; Gr 363–65). This original imperfection, moreover, is identified by Leibniz as a metaphysical evil (GP VI.115/H 136) and as the source of all morally evil actions (Gr 365; GP VI.115/H 135; GP III.34). However, for Leibniz the creaturely essence from which this original imperfection of a creature proceeds is eternal and independent of the divine will (Gr 365; GP VI.114–15/H 135). Thus, although God is responsible for the perfections to be found in creatures, he is not responsible for their imperfections (GP VI.613/AG 218). God is therefore not responsible for any creature's evil actions, even if he permits them (GP VI.450/S 130).

So understood, the original imperfection of a creature is something that *results* from its essence when God gives it being. For as Leibniz sometimes puts it, the essence of the creature limits its "receptivity"—that is, its capacity to receive perfection—so that it is limited in the perfection that it can receive from God (GP VI.450/S 130). Indeed, according to Leibniz, it is impossible for a creature not to lack some perfection, just as it is impossible for there to be an infinite circle (Gr 364–65). This original imperfection that results from a creature's essence, moreover, is sometimes characterized as a "limitation," since a limitation, like an imperfection, is essentially a defect, negation, or privation, according to Leibniz. For, as he puts it, "to limit is to refuse any further advance or *plus ultra*" (GP VI.383/H 384). Thus a mathematical point, according to Leibniz, "is nothing other than the negation of the progress of what it terminates" (Gr 126).¹¹ It is worth noting, however, that in one text Leibniz seems to distinguish between the original imperfection of creatures and something *else* that he calls a limitation: in a dialogue on the origin of evil, Leibniz states that before "every sin, there is an original imperfection in all creatures, *which comes from their limitation*" (Gr 365; my emphasis). In this same dialogue, moreover, Leibniz claims that the same original imperfection of creatures *comes from their essences* (Gr 365). It is, therefore,

¹¹See also A 3.7.885: "And really I conceive points not as elements of a line, but as limitations or negations of further progress, or as termini of a line."

reasonable to conclude that for Leibniz the original imperfection that comes from a creature's essence or nature does so by virtue of the fact that this essence itself incorporates some sort of negation or privation (i.e. by virtue of the fact that this essence is limited, or lacking in various respects). The same conclusion is suggested by another text in which Leibniz states that creatures "derive their imperfections from *their own nature, which is incapable of being without limits*" (GP VI.613/AG 218; my emphasis). Indeed, it might be argued that it is difficult to see how a creature's essence or nature could serve as a principle of imperfection unless it itself incorporated some sort of privation or negation.¹² As Leibniz puts it, "every imperfection comes from limitation, that is to say, from the privative" (GP VI.383/H 384).

I take it, then, that aside from "the original imperfection or limitation that the creature cannot have failed to receive with the first beginning of its existence" (GP VI 121/H 141–42), there is, according to Leibniz, an imperfection or limitation that resides in, or is somehow involved in, the very essence of the creature, from which the former, so-called 'original,' imperfection results. It is this imperfection within the essence itself that, I will be arguing here, Leibniz sometimes characterizes as the prime matter of the simple substance or monad.

As mentioned, there is good evidence for this thesis in Leibniz's works. For starters, Leibniz can be found assigning some of the same roles both to the prime matter of monads and to the original imperfection of creatures. For both are said by Leibniz to be the source of the resistance found in bodies (i.e. bodies' impenetrability and inertia), and both are said by him to be the source of the confusion that invariably exists in a created monad's perceptions. I begin with the issue of bodies' impenetrability and inertia.

There are several texts in which Leibniz describes prime matter as the source of a body's impenetrability and inertia. For example, in the *Specimen of Dynamics* (1695), Leibniz distinguishes between primitive forces and derivative forces and, after identifying the primitive active force of a substance with its first entelechy, further characterizes the substance's primitive force of being acted upon, or of resisting, as "that which is called *primary matter* in the schools, if correctly interpreted" (GM VI.236–37/AG 120). "This force," Leibniz adds,

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 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*. (GM VI.236–37/AG 120; emphasis in original)

Of course, the property by which one body resists penetration by another body is what Leibniz calls antitypy or impenetrability. And the property by which one body diminishes the force of another body acting on it is what Leibniz calls inertia. Both are here said to be due to prime matter or primitive passive force.

¹²Indeed, I think it is plausible to suppose that Leibniz has in mind creaturely essences when he speaks of how creatures are combinations of pure being and nothing (A 6.4.158/MP 3), or combinations of the positive and the privative (Gr 126).

Proponents of the view that Leibniz came to his idealist metaphysics after 1695 might object that it is far from obvious that the prime matter spoken of in this passage is the sort of thing that, together with a first entelechy, constitutes a simple substance or monad. I will not dispute the point here. Let me note, however, that there are passages in which Leibniz identifies prime matter with primitive passive power even when the prime matter at issue is clearly understood by him to be an aspect or metaphysical component of the individual monad or simple substance. Thus, in the famous five-fold scheme presented in his letter of June 20, 1703 to de Volder, Leibniz uses the expressions ‘prime matter’ and ‘primitive passive force’ to refer to the same thing—i.e. to that which, together with the soul or entelechy, constitutes the monad (GP II.252/AG 177; LDV 265). In the same letter, moreover, Leibniz states that derivative forces and the phenomena to which they belong result from monads (GP II.250/AG 176; LDV 261), and that “derivative forces are nothing but modifications and echoes [*resultationes*] of primitive forces” (GP II.251/AG 176; LDV 263).¹³ The clear implication here in this letter is that derivative passive forces such as inertia and impenetrability have their source in the prime matter or primitive passive power of monads.

Further, in a letter of April 30, 1709 to Bartholomew Des Bosses, Leibniz offers an argument that clearly presupposes the view that monadic prime matter is the principle of inertia and impenetrability. At issue in this portion of the correspondence is the claim that, if a single new monad is created and made dominant with respect to infinitely many others pre-existing in a given mass, and this with the result that a new animal is brought into being (the entelechy of the newly created monad serving as the new animal’s soul), still, the extension and resistance of the mass will not thereby be increased. As Leibniz puts it,

But what, you ask, will we say about the primary matter itself that is proper to the soul? I respond that this is certainly created with the soul, or that the complete monad is created. In that case, is primary matter not increased or decreased? I acknowledge that it is, since it is nothing but a primitive passive power. Then, you ask, is mass also increased? I concede that the number of monads, whose result assuredly is mass, is increased, but not extension and resistance, or the phenomena, any more than when a new point is created. Mass is a real phenomenon, and nothing is changed in the phenomena (with the obvious exception of those things that newly appear to the new monad itself) on account of the creation of a new monad, unless perhaps by miracle. (GP II.371/LDB 127)

The challenge that Leibniz is concerned to address in this passage is to explain why neither the mass nor the resistance of a body is increased as a result of the creation of a new monad within it. The assumption at work here is clearly that the prime matter of the relevant monads is the source of various features belonging to a given body, including its resistance. Granted this, one would think, an increase in the primitive passive power of the monads in a collection (resulting from the

¹³See also GP II.263–64/LDV 291: “When you say that in the beginning of things God endowed matter with derivative forces alone, you already tacitly involve primitive forces, since what matter is cannot be understood except by means of monads, since it is always an aggregate, or rather something resulting from many phenomena, until simples are arrived at.”

addition of a new monad to this collection) *should* result in an increase in the body's resistance. Leibniz, however, denies precisely this and offers, by way of explanation, a comparison with the addition of a point to some magnitude, such as a line: just as the creation of a new point does not increase the length of a line, so neither does the addition of a newly created monad's prime matter increase the resistance of a body.¹⁴

There are good reasons, then, to think that Leibniz understands the prime matter of monads to be the source of the resistance—that is, of the inertia and impenetrability—that is found in bodies.¹⁵ As mentioned, however, Leibniz can also be found claiming that a body's inertia has its source in the original imperfection of the creature, which (I have argued) has its source, according to him, in a limitation inherent in the creaturely essence.

Now, that Leibniz understands the original imperfection of creatures to be the source of bodies' natural inertia is made clear in the *Theodicy*, for example, when he states,

The famous Kepler, and after him Mr. Descartes (in his letters), spoke of the natural inertia of bodies; and it is something that can be considered a perfect image and even sample [*echantillon*] of the original limitation of creatures, in order to make clear that privation constitutes the formal aspect of the imperfections and disadvantages that are found in substances as well as in their actions. (GP VI.119/H 140)¹⁶

In section 42 of the second draft of the *Monadology*, moreover, after claiming that a creature's perfections come from God, while its imperfections come from its own nature, Leibniz adds that this "*original imperfection* of creatures is observed in the *natural inertia* of bodies" (GP VI.613/AG 218; emphasis in original).

Leibniz, then, can be found assigning one and the same role both to the prime matter of a monad and to the original imperfection of a creature. But, as I have argued, according to Leibniz, this original imperfection of the creature has its source, in turn, in some sort of defect or privation that lies within the very essence or nature of the creature. There are, therefore, good grounds for thinking that when Leibniz speaks of the prime matter of a monad he has in mind a limitation or negation in the very essence of that monad.

As I have mentioned, Leibniz's discussions of the resistance of bodies and its sources are not the only ones which suggest this conclusion. For Leibniz can also be found asserting that the confusion in a created monad's perceptions is the result of *both* its original imperfection *and* its prime matter.

That the original imperfection of creatures is the source of the confusion in a monad's perceptions is a claim made or implied in several of Leibniz's works. For example, in the *New Essays*, Leibniz speaks of a confusion that reigns in our ideas, a confusion that, because it results from an imperfection of our nature, involves no blame. By way of illustration, he notes that it is not within our power to discern the causes of our perceptions of smells and tastes (A 6.6.256/RB 256). In another

¹⁴See also Leibniz's letter of March 16, 1709 to Des Bosses (GP II.368/LDB 119).

¹⁵See also GP III.634/L 659 and GP II.276/AG 181 or LDV 319.

¹⁶See also GP VII.414/LC 60.

text, Leibniz asserts that “confused thoughts are marks of our imperfection” (GP VI.574/WF 140).

In yet another text, moreover, Leibniz claims that a monad or entelechy “would be God if it knew distinctly the infinity it enfolds” (GP IV.564). The same claim is also made in the *Monadology*:

Because God, in regulating everything, had regard for every part, and particularly for every monad, the nature of which is representative, nothing could limit it to representing only a part of things, even though it is true that this representation is only confused with respect to the details of the universe and can be distinct only with respect to a small part of things, that is to say, with respect to those things that are either closer or larger in relation to each monad; *otherwise every monad would be a divinity.* (GP VI.616–17/AG 220; my emphasis)

The implication of these last two texts is that perfect distinctness in one’s perception of everything in the universe is a mark of absolute perfection, which belongs to God alone. Granted, then, that confusion is for Leibniz an absence of distinctness, it seems that he understands the confusion in a created substance’s perceptions to be the result of its imperfection, which always has its source in its original imperfection, and more remotely, in a negation inherent in its essence.¹⁷

At the same time, it is clear that Leibniz also understands the prime matter of a created monad to be a principle of the confusion found in its perceptions. Thus, in a letter to Des Bosses, Leibniz states that prime matter is a principle of passion (GP II.306/LDB 35); indeed, this conception of prime matter, as a principle of passion, would seem to be at least part of what Leibniz means when he equates it with the monad’s primitive passive power.¹⁸ But as Leibniz explains elsewhere, monads’ “passions are found in their confused perceptions” (GP III.636/L 659). On Leibniz’s view, then, the created monad’s prime matter is a principle of the confusion that is invariably found in its perceptions.

Another passage testifies more directly to this. It appears at the very end of Leibniz’s *On the Manner of Distinguishing Real from Imaginary Phenomena*. It reads, “Substances have metaphysical matter or passive power insofar as they express something confusedly, but active power insofar as they express something distinctly” (A 6.5.1504/L 365). Here, Leibniz clearly implies that the passive power of a perceiving substance, which he elsewhere identifies with prime matter, is a principle of confusion in the substance’s perceptions. To be sure, in this text he speaks of *metaphysical* matter, and not of *prime* matter. But it is worth noting that the expression ‘*materia metaphysica*’ was often used by thirteenth-century proponents of universal hylomorphism to refer to prime matter, understood as a matter denuded of all form and common to every created being, both corporeal and spiritual.¹⁹

¹⁷See also GP III.34.

¹⁸See Jung, *Logica*, 32: “61. Passive power Δύναμις τοῦ παθεῖν is that according to which a substance suffers something [*pati aliquid*] or is apt to receive something, also called *capacity* [*capacitas*].”

¹⁹As I will make clear below, Bonaventure holds that matter, understood as something denuded of all forms whatsoever, is to be studied by the metaphysician, rather than the physicist, since, on his view, such matter is to be found in spiritual as well as corporeal beings. This may explain why later proponents of universal hylomorphism use the expression ‘metaphysical matter’ to refer to matter devoid of all form. (See the next three notes.) On Bonaventure’s view, the matter studied by the physicist is

Thus, in a work that was, up until the twentieth century, widely misattributed to John Duns Scotus, the Franciscan Vital du Four (ca. 1260–1327) distinguishes between first prime matter (*materia primo prima*) and second prime matter (*materia secundo prima*), labels the former type of matter “metaphysical” (*materia metaphysica*), and explains that metaphysical matter is found in both angels and rational souls while also serving “as a support of any form whatsoever.”²⁰ (Second prime matter, by contrast, is found only in corporeal substances, according to Vital, and is itself a hylomorphic composite of metaphysical matter and certain corporeal forms.²¹) Vital du Four, moreover, was hardly alone in using the expression ‘*materia metaphysica*’ in this sense. It is also used in this way by the thirteenth-century Dominican Robert Kilwardby (1215–79).²²

It seems clear, then, that Leibniz understands the prime matter of a monad to be a source or principle of perceptual confusion. As we have seen, however, Leibniz makes the same claim about created substances’ original imperfection, which has its own source in the essences of created substances: it, too, is said to be a principle of confusion in a monad’s perceptions. As in the case of a body’s natural inertia, then, we find the same role assigned to prime matter and to the original imperfection of creatures. Here too, then, we have reason to conclude that when Leibniz speaks of the prime matter of a monad he has in mind a limitation or negation in the very essence or nature of that monad, from which that monad’s original imperfection results.

That this is in fact the case is even more strongly suggested by another text of Leibniz’s. In a set of notes on the *Dissertation Concerning Middle Knowledge* of William Twisse (ca. 1578–1646), we find the following:

Givenness or act, and restriction or privation, are related to each other in beings as are metaphysical form and metaphysical matter. And so the matter of things is nothing, that is, limitation; form is perfection. (Gr 355–56)²³

The claim that each creature is in some way a combination of being and nothingness is not unusual in Leibniz. For example, in one text, Leibniz speaks of how “there is no hope that men can, in this life, reach this hidden series of things, by which it will appear in what way everything comes from pure being and nothing” (A 6.4.158/MP 3). And in another, he describes how creatures are “varied according to different combinations of the unit and zero, or of the positive and privative” (Gr 126).²⁴ But what makes this passage from the set of notes on

not mere matter, but a hylomorphic composite of matter and some form. Notice that Leibniz seems to use the expression ‘metaphysical matter’ at A 6.4.334 and A 6.4.1148 in a different way to mean the *suppositum*, as distinguished from its nature.

²⁰See Vital du Four, *Quaestiones disputatae de rerum principio*, q. 1, a. 1.

²¹See Vital du Four, *Quaestiones disputatae de rerum principio*, q. 8, a. 3.

²²See q. 14 of Kilwardby’s *Quaestiones in secundum librum Sententiarum*. Gregory Brown (“Dualism”) argues that ‘*materia metaphysica*’ is used in this sense by Descartes in a reply to Hobbes (AT VII.175/CSM I.123–24). I suspect that in this passage Descartes is using the expression to refer simply to the *suppositum*, as contrasted with the nature. On this distinction between nature and suppositum, see Suárez, DM 15.11.1 (*On the Formal Cause of Substance*, 177).

²³*Positio vel actus, et restrictio vel privatio se habent in entibus ut forma metaphysica et materia metaphysica. Et ita materia rerum est nihilum, id est limitatio; forma est perfectio.*

²⁴See also A 6.4.1577/AG 62; and Gr 363–65.

Twisse so interesting is its explicit identification of matter—indeed, *metaphysical* matter—with nothingness or limitation. The implication, I take it, is that what Leibniz calls the prime matter of a monad is understood by him to be a negation or limitation inherent in the monad's essence.

Finally, that this is the case is suggested also by a comparison of two texts from Leibniz. In one, Leibniz claims that “a being exempt from limitation would not be a creature, but God” (GP VI.449/S 129).²⁵ Given Leibniz's equation of limitation and negation, the implication here is that God wants for no perfection, or incorporates nothing of the privative or negative, and that in this respect God differs from every creature. Indeed, in the *Monadology*, after claiming that the natures of creatures are incapable of being without limits, Leibniz adds, “For it is in *this* that they are distinguished from God” (GP VI.613/AG 218; my emphasis). However, in another text, Leibniz states that God cannot deprive a created substance “of prime matter, for from this he would produce pure act such as he himself alone is” (GP II.325/LDB 79). As I understand him, by this Leibniz means to say that if, *per impossibile*, God were to remove the prime matter from a monad, then that monad would also be without anything of the privative or negative and therefore would also be absolutely perfect. The suggestion here, again, is that Leibniz understands the prime matter of a monad to be, not something real and positive, but a lack or defect—indeed, a lack or defect that is somehow incorporated (so to speak) into the monad's very essence. For this reason, Leibniz sometimes characterizes the essence of a creature as a source of its original imperfection, from which all other imperfections of the creature derive, and sometimes he characterizes a creature's prime matter as the source of its various imperfections.²⁶

That Leibniz should have chosen to express his view regarding the limitations inherent in creaturely essences in these two, ostensibly inconsistent, ways may strike one as surprising. In this connection, however, it is worth considering a note added to Leibniz's own copy of his letter of October 9, 1687 to Arnauld (A 2.2.250–51, n. 77). Leibniz does not use the expression ‘prime matter’ in this note, but he does mention a type of matter that is said to be distinct from both

²⁵See also GP VI.121/H 142: “God could not give a creature everything without making a God of it.”

²⁶That Leibniz thinks that one negation or defect can be a source or principle of another is made clear in §33 of the *Theodicy*:

In general perfection is positive, it is an absolute reality; defect is privative, it comes from limitation and tends towards new privations [*et tend à des privations nouvelles*]. This saying is therefore as true as it is ancient: *bonum ex causa integra, malum ex quolibet defectu* [i.e. good comes from a perfect cause, evil from some defect]; as also that which states: *malum causam habet non efficientem, sed deficientem* [i.e. evil has, not an efficient cause, but a deficient one]. (G VI.122/H 142–43)

Note also that many Christian thinkers held that evil, at least of a particular sort, is a defect of being, while also holding that evil, so understood, is not without consequences. Anselm, for example, argues that the privation of justice in the will of a human being is an evil. Indeed, he goes so far as to hold that this particular evil can even serve, in some way, as a principle of *real* and *positive* evils; see ch. 26 of his *De casu diaboli* (*Basic Writings*, 210). Cf. Aristotle, *Physics* II.3, 195a11–14 (*Complete Works*, I:333).

“mass without forms” and “secondary matter.”²⁷ After observing that the identity of a corporeal substance is preserved even as its body loses parts and gain new ones, since these parts are immediate requisites only *pro tempore* (i.e. for a time or temporarily), Leibniz adds,

But if one understands by the term *matter* something that is always essential to the same substance, one could, in the sense of certain Scholastics [*au sens de quelques Scholastiques*], understand by it the primitive passive power of a substance, and in this sense matter would not be extended or divisible, even though it would be the principle of divisibility or of what comes to it in the substance. But I do not want to argue about the use of terms. (A 2.2.251, n. 77)

Given Leibniz’s view that the body of a corporeal substance is composed of parts that the substance can lose without ceasing to be the same individual, and given his claim that the matter at issue here is *always* essential to the same substance, it seems likely that the matter discussed in this passage is conceived by him to be located outside the body of the corporeal substance. The identification of this matter with the primitive passive power of the substance, moreover, taken together with Leibniz’s claim that this matter is indivisible, strongly suggests that the subject of discussion here is prime matter, understood as an aspect or metaphysical component of the monad, substantial form or soul. Indeed, it suggests that the matter at issue here is the prime matter of the corporeal substance’s dominant monad.

This passage is important, in part, because it can help to dispel some of the surprise or suspicion one might feel in the face of the claim that Leibniz sometimes characterizes the essence of a creature (*qua* limited) as a source of its original imperfection while also sometimes characterizing a creature’s prime matter as the ultimate source of its various imperfections. For the passage clearly suggests a willingness on Leibniz’s part to describe elements of his metaphysics in terms that he characterizes as optional. It should come as no surprise, then, if we find him describing his views in different ways, and indeed, in ways that, from a strict historical perspective, seem proper to opposed schools or systems of thought.

Even if one finds the foregoing arguments convincing, however, one might reasonably demand some sort of explanation of *why* Leibniz should have chosen to express himself as he does, speaking here of how a negation in the creature’s essence serves as a principle of imperfection and there of how the prime matter of a monad is the origin of that monad’s imperfections. And this demand is not unreasonable: absent some such explanation, the alleged fact of Leibniz’s different ways of framing the same point is liable to seem unmotivated, at least. But the

²⁷This mass without forms seems equivalent, in Leibniz’s thinking, to matter as conceived by the Cartesians. The body of a corporeal substance is given as an example of secondary matter. Note that in at least one text Leibniz seems to label the former mass without forms ‘prime matter’; see GP VII, 529: “I answer, first, that an active principle is not attributed by me to bare or prime matter, which is purely passive and consists in antitypy and extension alone.” Cf. GP II.324/LDB 79: “prime matter does not consist in bulk [*in mole*] or impenetrability and extension.”

passage just quoted is significant in this connection as well, since its mention of “certain scholastics” raises the question of which scholastics Leibniz has in mind. The possible candidates, I daresay, are limited given that Leibniz understands the matter at issue in this passage to be located outside the body of the corporeal substance and in its soul or dominant monad. Indeed, it is not at all easy to see who else Leibniz might have in mind if not proponents of spiritual matter or universal hylomorphism. For this reason, in the next section, I offer a sketch of the debate regarding the doctrine of universal hylomorphism, concentrating especially on two of the most prominent positions taken in this debate—those of Aquinas and Bonaventure—and their implications for the source of creaturely imperfection, as such.²⁸

3. UNIVERSAL HYLOMORPHISM IN THE THIRTEENTH CENTURY²⁹

The view that all created substances (including spiritual ones) contain matter is sometimes thought to have its ultimate source in the *Fons vitae* of the Jewish poet and Neoplatonist philosopher Solomon Ibn Gabirol (1021/2–57/8), known to the Latin West as Avicbron (or by some variant of this name, such as Avencebrol).³⁰ That Ibn Gabirol was the originator of this view was certainly the opinion of Thomas Aquinas.³¹ It is also the opinion of several twentieth-century scholars.³² The paucity of surviving manuscripts of the Latin *Fons vitae* has suggested to some of these scholars, however, that the majority of philosophers in the West became acquainted with Ibn Gabirol’s views only indirectly, via the works of one of his twelfth-century translators, Dominicus Gundissalinus (fl. 1162–90), who, following Ibn Gabirol, affirmed the hylomorphic composition of all created substances.³³

²⁸For a couple of brief discussions of universal hylomorphism, see Wippel, “Essence and Existence,” 408–10; and Pasnau, “Form and Matter,” 636–38.

²⁹I offer the following brief discussion of the thirteenth-century debate over spiritual matter because I think it useful to an understanding of why Leibniz can be found attributing prime matter to created spiritual substances. For even if I do not hold that Leibniz himself subscribed to universal hylomorphism, I nevertheless hold that, as his mention of “certain scholastics” suggests, he *is* willing to cast his own view in terms employed by proponents of spiritual matter. I also wish to make clear just how important the debate over spiritual matter was in the thirteenth century by showing how many of that century’s major thinkers took part in this debate. And finally, although my focus will be on the views held by Bonaventure and Aquinas on the issue of creaturely imperfection, nevertheless, an awareness of the larger debate—which, I daresay, is not widespread among historians of early modern philosophy—provides the necessary context for the positions staked out by Aquinas and Bonaventure.

³⁰Ibn Gabirol’s view that simple substances contain matter is the focus of *Fons vitae*, Tract IV. This work was translated into Latin in the twelfth century by Dominicus Gundissalinus (or Gundisalvi), who was associated with the Toledo school of translators, and a certain Johannes Hispanus; only fragments of the Arabic original remain. The Latin version appears in Ibn Gabirol, *Fons vitae*.

³¹See ch. 4 of Thomas’s *De ente et essentia* (*Selected Writings*, 102).

³²See, for example, Crowley, *Roger Bacon*, 82; Van Steenberghen, *La Philosophie au XIIIe siècle*, 245; Martel, *Gonsalve d’Espagne*, 58–59; Weisheipl, “Albertus Magnus,” 244; Long, “Roger Bacon,” 266.

³³See Weisheipl, “Albertus Magnus,” 246. For Gundissalinus on universal hylomorphism, see Dominicus Gundissalinus, *De anima*, ch. 7, *De unitate*, and *De processione mundi*. For an English translation of this last work, see Dominicus Gundissalinus, *Procession of the World*.

There are, however, other scholars who deny that the doctrine of universal hylomorphism is original with Ibn Gabirol.³⁴ For one thing, these scholars claim, the notion of intelligible matter is to be found in Plotinus.³⁵ It is likewise to be found in Augustine of Hippo (354–430), whose indebtedness to Neoplatonic philosophy, especially of the Plotinian variety, is well documented.³⁶ Thus, in *Confessions* XII Augustine can be found entertaining the view that the words ‘heaven’ and ‘earth’ in the first verse of Genesis refer to a formless matter underlying the spiritual and corporeal creation. On this view, the earth that is said in the second verse to be invisible and incomposite (*terra invisibilis et incomposita*) is the formless matter of corporeal creatures, while the darkness which is said in the same verse to be over the abyss (*tenebrae super abyssum*) is the formless matter of spiritual creatures.³⁷ Much the same view, moreover, is discussed by Augustine in his *De Genesi ad litteram*: the heaven mentioned in the first verse of Genesis refers, perhaps, to spiritual matter (i.e. to the matter of created spiritual substances), while the earth mentioned in this same verse refers to a corporeal matter (i.e. to the matter of corporeal substances).³⁸ In both of these works, moreover, Augustine arguably commits himself to the existence of matter in spiritual beings by virtue of his claim, frequently repeated by thirteenth-century proponents of universal hylomorphism, that the natural mutability of all created beings requires the existence of matter in them.³⁹

It is worth noting, also, that thirteenth-century proponents of universal hylomorphism almost never cite Ibn Gabirol.⁴⁰ As for Gundissalinus, they do often cite his short treatise *De unitate*, but they do so in the mistaken belief that it is a work of Boethius (ca. 476–526?), whose theological treatises enjoyed great authority in the Middle Ages.⁴¹ The authorities most often mentioned by proponents of the doctrine are, in fact, Aristotle (384–322 BCE) and Augustine. That proponents of spiritual matter frequently cited Augustine is hardly surprising, given Augustine’s own statements. Contrary to what might be assumed, moreover, neither is it surprising that they often appealed to Aristotle. For although Aristotle himself denied any sort of hylomorphic composition in rational souls or unmoved movers (which were often identified with the angels of the Christian religion), this did not keep proponents of spiritual matter from employing Aristotelian principles in

³⁴See e.g. Sullivan, *Spiritual Matter*.

³⁵For a discussion of intelligible matter in Plotinus, see Rist, “The Indefinite Dyad.”

³⁶On the connection between Plotinus and Augustine on the topic of intelligible matter, see Armstrong, “Spiritual or Intelligible Matter.”

³⁷See *Confessionum libri* 12.17.25 (*Confessions*, 273). Notice that on this interpretation, formless matter is not temporally prior to the existence of bodies and spiritual beings. The priority at issue is merely a natural or causal one, not a temporal one. See *De Genesi ad litteram* I.15 and V.5 (*The Literal Meaning of Genesis*, 1:36 and 1:154).

³⁸See *De Genesi ad litteram* I.1 (*The Literal Meaning of Genesis*, 1:20).

³⁹See *Confessionum libri* 12.6.6 (*Confessions*, 263); *Confessionum libri* 12.17.25 (*Confessions*, 273); *Confessionum libri*, 12.19.28, (*Confessions*, 274); and *De Genesi ad litteram* I.14 (*The Literal Meaning of Genesis*, 1:35–36). Note that, according to Augustine, although the good angels are exempt from change, and therefore time, because their vision of God fixes them in a condition of changelessness, they nonetheless remain *naturally* susceptible of change. See *Confessionum libri* 12.9.9 (*Confessions*, 265).

⁴⁰One exception is Vital du Four, *Quaestiones disputatae de rerum principio*, q. 8, a. 4.

⁴¹Opponents of universal hylomorphism frequently denied that *De unitate* was a genuine work of Boethius. See, for example, Thomas Aquinas, *De spiritualibus creaturis*, a. 1, ad 21 (*On Spiritual Creatures*, 28).

making their case. This is especially so when it came to the question of explaining the mutability of all created substances.⁴²

Although there were exceptions, most proponents of universal hylomorphism were Franciscans, while most opponents were Dominicans. Exceptions include Richard Fishacre (ca. 1205–48),⁴³ Robert Kilwardby (1215–79),⁴⁴ Roland of Cremona (1178–1259),⁴⁵ all three early Dominican supporters of spiritual matter, and John of La Rochelle (1190/1200–45),⁴⁶ an early Franciscan opponent. Other exceptions include the seculars John Blund (ca. 1175–1248),⁴⁷ Philip the Chancellor (ca. 1160s–1236),⁴⁸ and Henry of Ghent (ca. 1217–93),⁴⁹ as well as the Augustinian Hermit Giles of Rome (ca. 1243/7–1316),⁵⁰ all four of whom rejected the doctrine of spiritual matter.

Franciscan proponents of universal hylomorphism include Richard Rufus (d. after 1259),⁵¹ Roger Bacon (ca. 1214/20–92),⁵² Bonaventure,⁵³ John Pecham (ca. 1230–92),⁵⁴ William de la Mare (d. 1298),⁵⁵ Matthew of Aquasparta (ca. 1238–1302),⁵⁶ Peter John Olivi (1247/8–98),⁵⁷ Richard of Middleton,⁵⁸ Gonsalvo

⁴²In fact, if Aristotle denied any sort of hylomorphic composition in the human soul or in the unmoved movers, this is arguably due to the fact that he denied subsistence to the former and change to the latter. But for the philosophers and theologians of the thirteenth century, the human soul is a spiritual substance capable of existing independently of the body, while the angels are not, like Aristotle's unmoved movers, immutable.

⁴³See Lottin, *Psychologie et morale*, 450–54; and Long, "Of Angels and Pinheads," esp. 241–45.

⁴⁴Robert Kilwardby, *De ortu scientiarum*, ch. 31; *Quaestiones in librum secundum sententiarum*, qq. 14–16.

⁴⁵See Lottin, *Psychologie et morale*, 431–32.

⁴⁶John Blund, *Summa de anima*, chs. 15–17, 25 (XI–XIII, XXIII); and Lottin, *Psychologie et morale*, 443.

⁴⁷John Blund, *Tractatus de anima*, ch. 24.

⁴⁸See Lottin, *Psychologie et morale*, 432–38.

⁴⁹Henry of Ghent, *Quodlibet* IV, q. 16.

⁵⁰Giles of Rome, *In secundum librum Sententiarum quaestiones*, d. 3, p. 1, q. 1, a. 1; and Sullivan, *Spiritual Matter*, 240–57.

⁵¹See Lottin, *Psychologie et morale*, 454–59; and Long, "Of Angels and Pinheads," esp. 251–54.

⁵²Roger Bacon, *Opus tertium*, ch. 38; *Questiones supra libros prime philosophie*, "Queritur de compositione substantie, utrum sit eam ponere," and "Queritur utrum ista compositio debet esse ex materia et forma" (on Bk. VIII of Aristotle's *Metaphysics*); *Questiones altere supra libros prime philosophie*, "Queritur utrum materia sit accidens" through "Queritur utrum determinat statum in causa materiali"; *Communium naturalium*, Pars IV, <Distinctio tertia de anima>, <Cap. 4, de compositione anime rationalis>. See also Crowley, *Roger Bacon*, 81–100; Long, "Roger Bacon"; and Sullivan, *Spiritual Matter*, 57–59.

⁵³Bonaventure, *Commentaria in I Sententiarum*, d. 8, pt. 2, a. 1, q. 2; *Commentaria in II Sententiarum*, d. 3, pt. 1, a. 1, qq. 1–3; *Commentaria in II Sententiarum*, d. 17, a. 1, q. 2. See also Robert, *Hylémorphisme*; Macken, "Le statut philosophique de la matière," 188–230; and Sullivan, *Spiritual Matter*, 61–103.

⁵⁴John Pecham, *Quaestiones tractantes de anima*, q. 25; *Quodlibeta*, q. 15.

⁵⁵See William's *Correctorium fratris Thomae*, a. 10, on the first part of Aquinas's *Summa Theologiae*, in Palémon Glorieux, ed., *Le Correctorium corruptorii 'Quare'*; see also Sullivan, *Spiritual Matter*, 164–72.

⁵⁶Matthew of Aquasparta, *Quaestiones disputatae de anima XIII*, q. 10. See also Sullivan, *Spiritual Matter*, 149–63.

⁵⁷Peter John Olivi, *Quaestiones in secundum librum Sententiarum*, q. 16. See also Sullivan, *Spiritual Matter*, 196–218.

⁵⁸Richard de Mediavilla, *Super quatuor libros Sententiarum*, d. 3, a. 1, q. 2 and d. 3, a. 2, q. 1. See also Hocedez, *Richard de Middleton*, 190–99; Sullivan, *Spiritual Matter*, 179–95.

of Spain (ca. 1255–ca. 1313),⁵⁹ and Vital du Four (ca. 1260–1327).⁶⁰ Dominican opponents include Hugh of St. Cher (ca. 1190–1263),⁶¹ Albert the Great (ca. 1200–1280),⁶² Thomas Aquinas,⁶³ John Quidort of Paris (d. 1306),⁶⁴ and Dietrich of Freiberg (ca. 1250–after 1310).⁶⁵

Common to all participants in the debate over universal hylomorphism was the belief that God alone is absolutely simple, every creature being in some way composite. Indeed, the dispute centered not on the question of whether every created substance was composite, but on the question of whether all such substances were composed, in particular, of matter and form. Thus, all participants to the debate followed Boethius in claiming that *quod est* and *esse* (or *quod est* and *quo est*) are identical in God but somehow different in every created substance, even if not all of these thinkers understood the distinction between *quod est* and *esse* in quite the same way.⁶⁶ But they disagreed on the question of whether angels and human souls contain matter. After the contributions of Aquinas and Bonaventure, whose views carried great weight in their respective orders, Dominicans almost invariably answered this question in the negative, while Franciscans up to Scotus answered it in the affirmative.

Another point on which participants in the debate were agreed was the belief that God alone, being altogether perfect, is pure act, without any admixture of potency. Every thing other than God contains some potentiality. Proponents and opponents of universal hylomorphism parted ways, however, on the question of matter's relation to potency. Those who endorsed spiritual matter or universal hylomorphism held that potency was invariably due to matter. Thus we find Bonaventure arguing, in his commentary on the second book of Peter Lombard's *Sentences*, that angelic mutability presupposes the presence of matter in angels. Here

⁵⁹Gonsalvus of Spain. *Quaestiones disputatae et de quodlibet*, q. 11. See also Sullivan, *Spiritual Matter*, 288–380; and Martel, *Gonsalve d'Espagne*, 57–79.

⁶⁰Vital du Four, *Quaestiones disputatae de rerum principio*, qq. 7 and 8. To this list of Franciscan proponents we can add the author of Pt. I, Bk. II, Inq. 4, Tract. 1, Sect. 1, Quaest. 2, Tit. 2. C. 1 ("Utrum anima humana sit composita ex materia et forma") of the *Summa theologica* attributed to Alexander of Hales. Alexander of Hales is commonly cited as a proponent of universal hylomorphism. But in his *Glossa* on Bk. II of Peter Lombard's *Sentences*, d. 3, Alexander denies that angels are composed of matter and form.

⁶¹See Lottin, *Psychologie et morale*, 429–31, 438–42.

⁶²See Albert the Great, *In II Sententiarum*, d. 1, A, a. 1 and d. 3, A, a. 4; *De causis*, I, tr. 1, chs. 5 and 6. See also Lottin, *Psychologie et morale*, 444–46; and Weisheipl, "Albertus Magnus."

⁶³Thomas Aquinas, *De ente et essentia*, ch. 4 (*Selected Writings*, 102–6); *Quaestiones disputatae de anima*, q. 6; *De spiritualibus creaturis*, a. 1 (*Spiritual Creatures*, 15–29); *De substantiis separatis*, chs. 6–8 (*Treatise on Separate Substances*, 61–82); *STI*, q. 75, a. 5 (*Treatise on Human Nature*, 10–13).

⁶⁴John Quidort, *Correctorium corruptori* 'Circa,' a. 9 (10).

⁶⁵Dietrich of Freiberg, "Quaestio utrum substantia spiritualis sit composita ex materia et forma."⁶⁶See Boethius's *De Hebdomadibus*. According to Aquinas, for example, the distinction between *quod est* and *esse* is none other than the distinction between essence and *esse*: only God's essence is identical to his *esse*. See Thomas's *De spiritualibus creaturis*, a. 1, ad 8 (*Spiritual Creatures*, 25–26). For Bonaventure, on the other hand, the distinction is between the individual substance or supposit and its essence: God is identical to his essence, according to Bonaventure, but a human being (i.e. *homo*), for example, is not the same as her essence (i.e. *humanitas*). See *In I Sent*, d. 23, a. 1, q. 3, conc.

Bonaventure appeals, by way of support, to Boethius's statement in his *De Trinitate* that nothing that is pure (or mere) form can be a subject of accidents, since a form does not receive anything except by means of a matter subject to it. Thus, if an angel is to receive an accident—as it does when it acquires new knowledge, for example—it must contain matter.⁶⁷

According to Bonaventure, then, every created substance contains matter, and this is made clear by the fact that every created substance is in some way mutable and receptive of accidents. This fact leads Bonaventure to deny that matter, as such, is the exclusive concern of the physicist: since, on his view, matter is not to be found exclusively in corporeal substances, Bonaventure holds that the physicist does not study matter according to its essence, and so as stripped of every substantial form whatsoever. Rather, the physicist considers matter only according to the *esse* that it has in corporeal things, this sort of *esse* being something that matter has by virtue of substantial corporeal forms inherent in it.⁶⁸ Conceived according to the *esse* that it has in bodies, moreover, matter is not considered in its universality, according to Bonaventure, for only when matter is conceived as stripped of every form whatsoever does it show itself to be present, and indeed essentially the same, in all created substances, whether spiritual or corporeal. For this reason, Bonaventure maintains, matter shorn of all form is the exclusive concern of the metaphysician.⁶⁹

As for the connection that opponents of universal hylomorphism usually find between matter, on the one hand, and both extension and corruptibility, on the other, Bonaventure maintains that the matter present in angels and rational souls is “elevated above the *esse* of extension and above the *esse* of privation and corruption”—which is why this sort of matter is termed ‘spiritual matter.’⁷⁰ For

⁶⁷Bonaventure, *Commentaria in II Sententiarum*, d. 3, p. 1, a. 1, q. 1.

⁶⁸Bonaventure, *Commentaria in II Sententiarum*, d. 3, p. 1, a. 1 q. 2. Note that for Bonaventure, form confers *esse*; see his *Commentaria in II Sententiarum*, d. 3, p. 1, a. 2, q. 3.

⁶⁹In his *Commentaria in II Sententiarum*, d. 3, p. 1, a. q. 2, Bonaventure distinguishes the *physicus inferior*, who deals with the corruptible substances of the sublunary sphere, from the *physicus superior*, who deals with the incorruptible substances of the celestial sphere. In this question, moreover, Bonaventure explains that when we speak of the unity of matter, we speak of it insofar as we effect a kind of resolution that terminates with matter. With this in mind, he goes on to say that matter is therefore spoken of in three ways, corresponding to the three types of thinker—the *physicus inferior*, the *physicus superior*, and the metaphysician—who effect a resolution to matter. The first considers matter as a principle of generation and corruption, and matter, so conceived, is found only in the bodies of the sublunary world. The *physicus inferior*, then, confines himself to claiming that matter is the same in all generable things. The *physicus superior*, on the other hand, considers matter as changeable with respect to form and place, and therefore finds in all bodies, both super- and sublunary, the passions through which bodies are changeable with respect to place (e.g. the divisibility of the moveable). And so his resolution is to the matter of every corporeal thing, and he claims that matter is the same in all bodies, both generable and ingenerable. Finally, Bonaventure says, “[T]he metaphysician considers the nature of every creature, and especially [the nature] of that substance which is a being [*ens*] *per se*, in which one considers both the act of *esse*, which form gives, and the stability of existing *per se*, which is present in, and given by, that in which form finds its support, i.e. matter.” And since, he continues, to be *per se* is something common to both spiritual and corporeal substances, and involves a community of genus and thing, rather than a mere community of analogy, it follows that, “according to the metaphysician, the unity of matter extends to all *per se* beings.”

⁷⁰Bonaventure, *Commentaria in II Sententiarum*, d. 17, a. 1, q. 2, conc.

on Bonaventure's view, prime matter is initially informed either by the form of spirituality or by the form of corporeity, and only when matter is informed by the latter form is it extended.⁷¹ As for being lifted above privation and corruption, Bonaventure holds that matter, by virtue of its potency for form, has an "appetite" for form, which can be sated or "terminated" by a substantial form inhering in it—specifically, when that substantial form is of such great dignity that the matter in which it inheres is no longer in any way able to desire some other substantial form. In such a case, matter is no longer in potency to another form, and the entire composite is, as a result, incorruptible—that is, naturally indestructible. Such is the case with both human souls and angels.⁷²

Most crucial here for my purposes, however, is Bonaventure's view that potency is invariably due to matter. For it is this view, it seems, that leads Bonaventure to claim that "the principle of all limitation is matter or something material."⁷³ This he does in the course of an argument aimed at showing that "the divine being is infinite in the highest degree." Granted that the principle of all limitation is matter or something material, Bonaventure argues, and the fact that the divine being is pure act, and therefore altogether immaterial, it follows that the divine being lacks limitation and finitude. Therefore, he concludes, God is absolutely infinite.

For Bonaventure, then, matter is the source or principle of creaturely imperfection as such, since it is the source of every limitation and every creature is limited. As mentioned, however, opponents of universal hylomorphism denied that potency is invariably due to matter—not surprisingly, since not every created substance contains matter, on their view, even if every created substance differs from God in containing some mixture of potentiality and some measure of imperfection. For someone like Aquinas, then, matter cannot serve as a principle of creaturely imperfection as such.

Aquinas held instead that each and every creature's nature or essence, whether it contains matter or not, stands to that creature's *esse* or existence as potency stands to act.⁷⁴ To be sure, on his view, God's essence is really the same as his *esse* or existence, with the result that the *esse* and *essentia* of God do not stand in the act-potency relation.⁷⁵ But God is in this respect unique, according to Aquinas:

⁷¹Bonaventure, *Commentaria in II Sententiarum*, d. 3, p. 1, a. 1, q. 2, ad 4. Note that for Bonaventure, when matter first begins to exist under one of these two forms, it is no longer in potency to the other, with the result that spiritual substances are never transformed into corporeal ones or vice versa. See *Commentaria in II Sententiarum*, d. 3, p. 1, a. 1, q. 2, ad 3.

⁷²See *Commentaria in II Sententiarum*, d. 19, a. 1, q. 1, conc.

⁷³See Bonaventure, *De Mysterio Trinitatis*, q. 4, a. 1, arg. *pro* 13.

⁷⁴See Aquinas, *De ente et essentia*, ch. 4 (*Selected Writings*, 105): "But everything that receives [something] from another is in potency with respect to that [which it receives], and what is received is in it as its act; therefore, it must be the case that the very quiddity or form which is the intelligence is in potency with respect to the *esse* that it receives from God, and that that received *esse* is an act. And in this way potency and act are found in intelligences."

⁷⁵See Aquinas, *Summa contra gentiles* I, ch. 22 (*SCGI*, 120): "*Being*, furthermore, is the name of an act, for a thing is not said to be because it is in potency but because it is in act. Everything, however, that has an act diverse from itself is related to that act as potency to act; for potency and act are said relatively to one another. If, then, the divine essence is something other than its *esse*, the essence and the *esse* are thereby related as potency and act. But we have shown that in God there is no potency, but that He is pure act. God's essence, therefore, is not something other than His *esse*."

whereas God's essence is really the same as his *esse*, this is not so in the case of any creature, since a creature, or more specifically its essence, receives *esse* from elsewhere—that is, from God.⁷⁶ And what *receives* in this case stands to what *is received* as potency stands to act.

By '*esse*' here, it should be noted, Aquinas has in mind more than what *we* might mean when we speak of existence. For one thing, *esse* admits of more or less, according to the Angelic doctor, and this in such a way that the greater a thing's *esse*, the more excellent or perfect it is.⁷⁷ This is important for my purposes because, in keeping with the principle that reception occurs in accordance with the mode of the receiver (*fit receptio secundum modum recipientis*),⁷⁸ Aquinas holds that the *esse* received from God is limited or contracted by the essence that receives it. Only an unreceived act, like God's *esse*, which is really the same as God's essence, can be infinite, according to Aquinas.⁷⁹

For the Angelic doctor, then, the essence of a creature plays a role quite like the one that matter plays in Bonaventure and other proponents of universal hylomorphism: the creaturely essence is a principle of creaturely imperfection as such, since it "contracts" or "limits" the *esse*, and thus perfection, that each and every creature receives from God. As we have seen, for Bonaventure, on the other hand, "the principle of every limitation is matter or something material." For his part, Aquinas grants that matter is a principle of imperfection in corporeal substances, but since he denies that matter is to be found in spiritual substances like angels and the human soul,⁸⁰ he denies that matter is a principle of imperfection in spiritual

⁷⁶See Aquinas's *De ente et essentia*, ch. 4 (*Selected Writings*, 104–5).

⁷⁷See Aquinas's *Summa contra gentiles* I, ch. 28 (*SCG I*, 135): "Every excellence in any given thing belongs to it according to its *esse*. For man would have no excellence as a result of his wisdom unless through it he were wise. So, too, with the other excellences. Hence, the mode of a thing's excellence is according to the mode of its *esse*. For a thing is said to be more or less excellent according as its *esse* is limited to a certain greater or lesser mode of excellence." See also John F. Wippel, *Metaphysical Thought of Aquinas*, 170–74. Note that, according to Aquinas, although all forms, both substantial and accidental, confer *esse* of some sort, accidental forms such as wisdom confer *esse tale* while substantial forms confer *esse simpliciter*. That is, accidental forms do not make a thing *be*, full stop. Rather, they make a thing *be green, hot, wise*, etc. A substantial form, by contrast, makes a thing *be*, full stop, inasmuch as it makes that thing *be a substance of some sort*. On this, see *ST I*, Q. 76, art. 4, corpus (*Treatise on Human Nature*, 34–35).

⁷⁸See Aquinas, *De substantiis separatis*, ch. 7 (*Treatise on Separate Substances*, 70).

⁷⁹See Aquinas, *De spiritualibus creaturis*, a. 1, resp. (*Spiritual Creatures*, 23).

⁸⁰Although Aquinas explicitly denies that spiritual substances contain matter, he does grant that, if, contrary to the custom of the philosophers, one wants to use the term 'matter' to refer to any sort of potency whatsoever, then it is true to say that spiritual substances contain matter. He notes, however, that 'matter' would in this case be used equivocally when it is said that both corporeal and spiritual substances have matter. See *De spiritualibus creaturis*, art. 1, resp. (*Spiritual Creatures*, 23); *Quaestiones disputatae de animae*, Q. 6, resp.; *De ente et essentia*, ch. 4 (*Selected Writings*, 105). Moreover, in ch. 7 of *De substantiis separatis* (*Treatise on Separate Substances*, 71), Aquinas argues that, even if we want to speak of spiritual substances as having matter, *their* matter will certainly not be *prime* matter, which is, in itself, a being only potentially. The matter of a spiritual substance would have to be, to the contrary, a being in act. Finally, notice also that for Aquinas the matter of a spiritual substance is none other than its essence. For Leibniz, on the other hand, prime matter is, at best, one part of a created substance's essence, its entelechy or primitive active force being the other.

substances and so denies that matter is a principle of creaturely imperfection *as such*. What explains the imperfection of creatures *qua* creatures, according to Aquinas, is the fact that the *esse* that a creature receives from God is contracted or limited by its essence.

4. CONCLUSION

The accounts of creaturely imperfection offered by Bonaventure and Aquinas call to mind Leibniz's two ways of accounting for creaturely imperfection—first, in terms of prime or metaphysical matter, and second, in terms of an essence that limits the creature's receptivity or capacity for perfection. Indeed, it seems to me that, with this brief discussion of Bonaventure and Aquinas, we have a fairly good explanation of why Leibniz should have chosen to explain himself as he did. The positions of Bonaventure and Aquinas constitute precedents, precedents familiar, no doubt, to many of his correspondents. Moreover, if Leibniz's choice to explain himself in these two different ways initially leaves us with the impression that there are two competing accounts at work in his thinking, we do well, it seems to me, to remember Leibniz's philosophical ecumenicism, and his well-attested tendency to overlook important differences between his philosophical predecessors—a tendency that is made abundantly clear when, for example, at the beginning of the *New Essays*, Leibniz has Theophilus claim for his own system that “it appears to unite Plato with Democritus, Aristotle with Descartes, [and] the Scholastics with the moderns” (A 6.6.71/RB 71).

The conclusion argued for here has the advantage of allowing us to avoid the difficulty, mentioned earlier, that arises from the supposition that Leibniz posits some real and positive entity in every monad that seems capable of doing nothing but limit and even frustrate that monad's own activity. For prime matter is not, on the account presented here, something real and positive, according to Leibniz, but a mere negation or privation—a want of greater perfection.

Of even greater interest, perhaps, are the possible consequences of this account for our understanding of Leibniz's conception of inertia. In several texts quoted above, Leibniz can be seen to locate the source of a body's inertia in the original imperfection of creatures—that is, in a negation or privation. The conclusion that prime matter, likewise characterized as a principle of inertia in bodies, is not something real and positive in creatures reinforces this view that inertia, according to Leibniz, arises from a negation or privation. It therefore *further* motivates the need to answer a question that already suggests itself when one considers Leibniz's claim that inertia arises from creatures' original imperfection—namely: how can a negation give rise to bodies' inertia? It is tempting to suppose that Leibniz's considered view is that inertia is not something real and positive, either, but consists, rather, in a want of greater derivative active force. If this is right, however, it might be thought to commit us to the view that Leibniz himself would be prepared to describe a change in some body's velocity as invariably spontaneous and its resistance to such a change as merely apparent, this “resistance” resulting in fact from a want of more of that force by which the body spontaneously changes its

own velocity. There is, let it be noted, some textual support for this view.⁸¹ But a more extensive discussion of this issue I must leave for another time.

I have argued in this paper that, although Leibniz sometimes accounts for creaturely imperfection by appeal to prime matter and sometimes accounts for it by appeal to the limited receptivity of every creaturely essence, the latter is closer to his considered view. Indeed, on the account presented here, Leibniz holds that the essence of a creature limits its receptivity by virtue of the fact that this essence incorporates limitations, which together constitute a negation. Leibniz's talk of prime matter is not to be taken as involving a commitment to something real and positive in every created substance. Such talk is merely a product of Leibniz's willingness to cast his views in terms borrowed from his philosophical predecessors—in this case, from Bonaventure and (no doubt) from other proponents of spiritual matter. Leibniz's prime matter, in the final analysis, is to be identified with a negation at the heart of every creaturely essence.

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⁸¹See A 2.2.245–46/LA 148, n. 3: "bodies, rigorously speaking, are not pushed by others when an impact occurs, but by their own proper motion, which is still a motion of their parts. Every corporeal mass, great or small, already has in it all the force that it can ever acquire, but an encounter with other bodies gives to it only the determination of [its force], or rather, this determination occurs only at the time of the encounter." Notice the suggestion that the collision of one body, *A*, with another body, *B*, does not determine *B*'s force, but merely provides an occasion, as it were, for the determination of *B*'s force.

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