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False Ideas: Leibniz and Aquinas

Fausses idées: Leibniz et Thomas d’Aquin

Falsche Ideen: Leibniz und Thomas von Aquin

ABSTRACT: Though accepting the traditional view that truth and falsity are properties of propositions and judgments, Leibniz does not refrain from predicating truth and falsity of pre-judgmental items such as ideas, which he considers to be true iff logically consistent, and false otherwise. Elsewhere, however, Leibniz claims that ideas are true or false only insofar as they include the (true or false) affirmation that their object is possible. This paper aims to cast light on Leibniz’s doctrine of ideas as truth-bearers by exploring its historical background. On the one hand, Leibniz’s pronouncements reflect his reaction to the post-Cartesian debates. On the other hand, they appear to be inspired from Aquinas’s doctrine of accidental falsity.

Keywords: Aquinas, definition, Desgabets, *falsitas per accidens*, Foucher, Leibniz, *simplex apprehensio*, truth-bearers

RÉSUMÉ : Tout en acceptant la conception traditionnelle qui voit la vérité et la fausseté comme propriétés des propositions et des jugements, Leibniz ne s’abstient pas de les attribuer même à des objets pré-judicatifs tels que les idées. Selon lui, une idée est vraie si et seulement si elle est logiquement cohérente ; autrement elle est fausse. Ailleurs, pourtant, Leibniz soutient que les idées ne sont vraies ou fausses que dans la mesure où elles renferment l’affirmation (vraie ou fausse) que leur objet est possible. Cet article vise à éclaircir la doctrine leibnizienne des idées comme porteuses de vérité à travers l’exploration de son arrière-plan historique. Si d’un côté la position de Leibniz reflète sa réaction aux débats post-cartésiens, de l’autre elle tire son inspiration de la doctrine thomiste de la fausseté accidentelle.

Mots-clés : Thomas d’Aquin, définition, Desgabets, *falsitas per accidens*, Foucher, Leibniz, *simplex apprehensio*, porteurs de vérité

KURZFASSUNG: Obwohl Leibniz die herkömmliche Auffassung vertritt, wahr und falsch seien Eigenschaften von Sätzen und Urteilen, nimmt er doch nicht Abstand davon, vorurteilsbehaftete Positionen wie Wahrheit und Falschheit sogar den Ideen zuzuschreiben, von denen er behauptet, sie seien wahr, wenn und nur wenn sie logisch konsistent sind, ansonsten seien sie falsch. Laut anderen Stellen sind hingegen die Ideen nur insofern wahr oder falsch, als sie die (wahre oder falsche) Behauptung beinhalten, dass ihr Gegenstand möglich sei. Ziel dieses Beitrags ist es, Leibniz’ Lehre von den Ideen als Wahrheitsträgern durch eine Untersuchung ihres geschichtlichen Hintergrunds zu erhellen. Einerseits spiegeln Leibniz’ Ansichten seine Reak-

tion auf die nachcartesischen Debatten. Andererseits zeigen sie die Spuren der thomistischen Lehre der zufälligen Falschheit.

Schlagworte: Thomas von Aquin, Definition, Desgabets, *falsitas per accidens*, Foucher, Leibniz, *simplex apprehensio*, Wahrheitsträger

Introduction*

In a 1684 article in the *Acta Eruditorum*, Leibniz states his view on true and false ideas: “[A]n idea is true when its notion is possible and false when it includes a contradiction”¹. In the following years, similar formulations appear several times in his writings². Yet, like most early modern philosophers, Leibniz endorses the standard Aristotelian view on truth-bearers³, stating that truth and falsity belong to judgments or propositions, but not to ideas, concepts, or simple terms. Truth-values belong to what the Scholastics call the second operation of the intellect, not to the first. How, then, can Leibniz allow ideas to be true or false⁴? The received reading says that, when applied to ideas or concepts, “true” and “false” do not express the same properties that are ascribed to propositions or judgments; rather, they express the logical properties of consistency and inconsistency. Since consistency is essential to Leibnizian ideas, Leibniz’s true ideas are actually *genuine* ideas, as opposed to spurious ones⁵. To say that a certain idea is true simply means that

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- 1 “Meditationes de cognitione, veritate, et ideis”, A VI, 4 A, N. 141, p. 589: “[*Idea*] vera scilicet cum notio est possibilis, falsa cum contradictionem involvit”; quoted from *G. W. Leibniz. Philosophical Essays*, ed. and transl. by R. Ariew and D. Garber, Indianapolis/Cambridge 1989 (henceforth: Ariew/Garber), p. 26. If no reference is given, translations are my own. In my opinion, the distinction between idea and notion is negligible here. The first draft of the text read “when *the thing* is possible” (emphasis added); then Leibniz must have simply decided to ascribe possibility directly to cognitive or epistemic items.
- 2 See e.g. “Discours de métaphysique”, § 23, A VI, 4 B, N. 306, p. 1567: “C’est donc en ce sens, qu’on peut dire, qu’il y a des idées vraies et fausses, selon que la chose dont il s’agit est possible ou non”; “Nouveaux essais sur l’entendement humain”, II, XXXII, § 5, A VI, 6, N. 2, p. 269: “Ainsi les idées possibles sont vraies, et les idées impossibles sont fausses”.
- 3 On truth-bearers, see “Dialogus”, A VI, 4 A, N. 8, pp. 20–21. The view that propositions are truth-valuable, whereas concepts are not, is stated in A VI, 4 A, N. 126, p. 528: “Cogitabile est aut simplex aut complexum. Simplex dicitur Notio seu Conceptus. Complexum est quod in se involvit Enuntiationem sive Affirmationem aut negationem, verum aut falsum”. See also A VI, 6, N. 2, p. 398.
- 4 An analogous problem arises for Leibniz’s claim that perceptions are true. See M. Favaretti Camposampiero, “Before Judging. Leibniz on the Ultimate Origin of Error”, in: *Rivista di storia della filosofia* 71 (2016), pp. 727–744.
- 5 See H. Burkhardt, *Logik und Semiotik in der Philosophie von Leibniz*, München 1980, p. 156: “Die falsche Idee ist also gar keine Idee, das Wort ‘falsch’ hat in diesem Kontext die Bedeutung von ‘unecht’” (see also pp. 161 and 240); R. Rovira, “Haben wir keine Idee von unmöglichen Dingen? Kritische Bemerkungen über die Leibnizsche Auffassung der falschen Ideen”, in: H. Poser (ed.), *Nihil sine ratione. Mensch. Natur und Technik im Wirken von G. W. Leibniz. VII. Internationaler Leibniz-Kongress, Berlin, 10.–14. September 2001*, 3 vols. and supplement vol., Berlin/Hannover 2001–2002, vol. III, Berlin 2001, pp. 1101–1106, at p. 1102.

it is truly an idea. This answer is certainly plausible and has textual support⁶. However, I believe it is incomplete, for it leaves several issues unexplained.

This paper addresses two such issues. First, why does Leibniz resort to expressions such as “true idea” and “false idea”? Why not simply speak of “genuine” or “consistent ideas”? Second, in the *New Essays on Human Understanding*, ideas are said to be true or false by virtue of the possibility statement they all involve⁷. Thus, Leibniz appears committed to three different theses:

- (L1) Truth and falsity are to be found in propositions alone.
- (L2) Ideas are true or false only by virtue of an involved proposition.
- (L3) Consistent ideas are true; inconsistent ideas are false.

At first sight, these claims can hardly fit together into one coherent view. Although (L1) is compatible with (L2), both seem to be at odds with (L3), if this latter is taken at face value as ascribing truth and falsity to the ideas themselves. The received reading of (L3) succeeds in making it consistent with (L1), but still fails to reconcile (L2) with (L3)⁸. My aim is to cast light on these three theses by investigating their sources and historical background. While on the one hand, they target the post-Cartesian debate on true and false ideas, on the other hand, they have an authoritative precedent in Aquinas⁹.

1. Early Modern Controversies over an Old Puzzle

Leibniz’s *Meditations on Knowledge, Truth, and Ideas* are most known for such topics as the degrees of cognitive clarity or the different types of definitions. In later occasions, however, Leibniz refers to these *Meditations* as a text “on true and false ideas”¹⁰, as though this was their main subject. Indeed, we find the topic announced at the very beginning of the text, where Leibniz explains the occasion that prompted him to write:

6 Leibniz himself speaks of “genuine concepts”, as opposed to “fictitious” ones (A VI, 4 A, N. 206, p. 973). In his remarks on Jaquelot, the condition that an idea be true is alternatively stated as follows: “Supposé que ce soyent véritablement des idées, car il n’y a que les notions possibles qui en fournissent” (A II, 4, N. 25, p. 119 (GP III, 445)). Taken in this sense, the truth of ideas is metaphysical truth. This interpretation dissolves Mates’s puzzle about inconsistent concepts. B. Mates, *The Philosophy of Leibniz. Metaphysics and Language*, Oxford 1986, pp. 67–68, asks how Leibniz can consistently maintain that some ideas are false in the specified sense, since he expressly denies that there are ideas of impossible things.

7 “Nouveaux essais sur l’entendement humain”, IV, V, § 11, A VI, 6, N. 2, p. 398.

8 Some commentators, however, see no difficulty in juxtaposing (L2) and (L3). See Y. Belaval, *La pensée de Leibniz*, Paris 1952, p. 217; and Burkhardt, *Logik und Semiotik* (see note 5), p. 156.

9 A glimpse of this background is given by J.-B. Rauzy, *La doctrine leibnizienne de la vérité. Aspects logiques et ontologiques*, Paris 2001, pp. 21–25 and 29–33.

10 See A II, 2, N. 16, p. 92 (“une remarque sur les idées vrayes ou fausses”); A VI, 4 B, N. 348, p. 1815 (“Videantur quae dixi de veris et falsis ideis”); A II, 2, N. 99, p. 374 (“in meditatione de veris falsisque ideis”); A II, 2, N. 100, pp. 379–380 (“in meditatione de veris falsisque ideis”).

Since controversies rage today among distinguished persons over true and false ideas [*de veris et falsis ideis*] and since this is an issue of great importance for knowing truth, an issue on which Descartes himself is not altogether satisfactory, I would like to explain briefly what I think should be established about the distinctions and criteria of ideas and cognition¹¹.

True and false ideas are introduced as an important and controversial issue. But what controversies are referred to? Of course, the phrase *de veris et falsis ideis* calls to mind Arnauld's 1683 treatise *Des vrayes et des fausses idées*, which inaugurated his resounding polemic against Malebranche. Indeed, reference to Arnauld's book as having occasioned Leibniz's *Meditations* has become standard among editors and scholars¹². However, Arnauld's use of the phrase "true and false ideas" appears to have nothing to do with the problem of whether ideas can have truth-values. His book is not about ideas as truth-bearers; it is about which characterization of ideas is true, and which is false¹³. On the other hand, we know that in 1684 Leibniz had not yet read Arnauld's book¹⁴, so it is not impossible that he was misled by its title into thinking that Arnauld was concerned with the truth and falsity of ideas. As late as 1686, indeed, Leibniz oddly congratulated Arnauld on letting "Father Malebranche and others know that one must distinguish between true and false ideas"¹⁵.

Be that as it may, we should not overlook that Leibniz mentions "controversies" in the plural, thereby hinting at a widely discussed topic rather than a single episode. The same topic that another major work of Arnauld, the so-called *Port-Royal Logic*, described as "a famous issue, namely whether falsity can exist only in propositions, or whether it is also found in ideas and simple terms"¹⁶. Moreover, some twenty years before the *Logic*

- 11 A VI, 4 A, N. 141, p. 585: "Quoniam hodie inter Viros egregios de veris et falsis ideis controversiae agitantur, eaque res magni ad veritatem cognoscendam momenti est, in qua nec ipse Cartesius usquequaque satisfacit, placet quid mihi de discriminibus atque criteriis Idearum et cognitionum statuendum videatur, explicare paucis"; quoted from Ariew/Garber, p. 23 (transl. modified).
- 12 See A. Robinet, *Malebranche et Leibniz. Relations personnelles*, Paris 1955, p. 135. Loemker writes that the paper published in 1684 "was clearly occasioned by the appearance of Arnauld's attack on Malebranche's theory of knowledge in the *Des vraies et des fausses idées*, though Leibniz did not study the controversy in detail until later" (*G. W. Leibniz. Philosophical Papers and Letters*, ed. and transl. by L. E. Loemker, Dordrecht 1969, p. 291). According to Ariew and Garber: "The controversies to which Leibniz refers in the opening paragraph were the famous Arnauld-Malebranche debate" (Ariew/Garber, p. 23). See also Burkhardt, *Logik und Semiotik* (see note 5), p. 155; M. Mugnai, *Introduzione alla filosofia di Leibniz*, Torino 2001, p. 67.
- 13 See A. Arnauld, *Des vrayes et des fausses idées contre ce qu'enseigne l'auteur de la Recherche de la vérité*, Cologne 1683, p. 34: "on peut prouver geometriquement la fausseté des *Idées*, prises pour des estres *representatifs*". It is not ideas that are false, but rather Malebranche's characterization of ideas as representative beings (see p. 14).
- 14 See Leibniz's letter to Tschirnhaus, October 1684, A II, 1, N. 247, p. 861.
- 15 Leibniz to Arnauld, 14 July 1686, A II, 2, N. 13, p. 66: "[...] vous avés eu grande raison, de faire connoistre au Pere Malebranche et autres, qu'il faut distinguer entre les idees vrayes et fausses"; quoted from *The Leibniz-Arnauld Correspondence*, ed. and transl. by H. T. Mason, Manchester 1967, p. 72.
- 16 A. Arnauld / P. Nicole, *Logic or the Art of Thinking* (= *Cambridge Texts in the History of Philosophy*), transl. and ed. by J. V. Buroker, Cambridge 1996, p. 91; cf. A. Arnauld / P. Nicole, *La logique ou l'art de penser* (= *Bibliothèque des textes philosophiques*), ed. by P. Clair and F. Girbal, Paris 1993, p. 124: "Ce que nous venons de dire peut servir à resoudre une question celebre, qui est de savoir si la fausseté ne se peut trouver que

Arnauld himself had debated with Descartes on the question of whether it is possible for an idea to be false¹⁷.

Thus, Leibniz may well have thought that Arnauld's quarrel with Malebranche was related to this issue – all the more so as he was aware of another debate triggered by Malebranche's *Recherche*. This debate was indeed a controversy about true and false ideas, and involved the Cartesian Robert Desgabets, who claimed that all of our ideas are true, and Leibniz's friend Simon Foucher, who objected that ideas are neither true nor false. This is, in my view, the main issue that Leibniz intended to address in his 1684 *Meditations*. By clarifying in what sense ideas can be said to be true or false, he aimed to solve an old but still challenging puzzle.

2. Suárez and Leibniz against Trivialism

Both Desgabets and Foucher sought to establish their position by reference to scholastic authorities. In their appeals to tradition, both were partially right, for the scholastic answer to the question was far from unanimous. Even partisans of the mainstream view, who were resolute in denying the presence of truth and falsity in the first mental operation, recognized the force of the arguments for introducing truth-values even at the stage of simple, pre-judgmental cognitions. If propositional truth is said to consist in the conformity or correspondence between propositions and states of affairs, why should some sort of conformity not pertain to simple cognitions as well? Why not say that concepts are true if they conform to their object and false if they do not? For a moment, let us think of our concepts as mental representations or portraits of things. What could be more essential for a representation than its conformity or correspondence to the thing it represents?

Certainly, if concepts were devoid of this conformity, they could not play their representational role. As Francisco Suárez puts it, “in order for a thing to be conceived by a simple concept, it is necessary that the concept has some conformity to the thing in representing [...] Thus, that conformity is a sort of truth [*quaedam veritas*]”¹⁸. To counter arguments of this kind, Suárez invokes what I dub the Conformity Principle. A concept must, of course, conform to the thing it represents; but if it does not, then it is simply no concept of that thing. Consider, for instance, a portrait of Julius Caesar. Even if the painted image does not resemble Caesar in any way, we would not take it to be a *false* portrait of Caesar. Rather, we might wonder whether it is a portrait of Caesar at all. What we

dans les propositions, et s'il n'y en a point dans les idées et dans les simples termes”. Leibniz mentions this work in his “Meditationes de cognitione, veritate, et ideis”, A VI, 4 A, N. 141, p. 591.

¹⁷ See *Œuvres de Descartes*, éd. par C. Adam et P. Tannery, 13 vols., Paris 1964–1974 (henceforth: AT), vol. VII, pp. 206–207 and 232–235.

¹⁸ F. Suárez, *Disputationes metaphysicae*, 2 vols., Paris 1861–1866, in: R. P. Francisci Suárez *Opera omnia*, editio nova a C. Berton, 28 vols., Paris 1856–1878, vols. 25–26, disp. VIII, sect. 3, § 5: “[...] ut per simplicem conceptum res concipiatur, necesse est ut sit aliqua conformitas conceptus ad rem in repraesentando [...] ergo illa conformitas est quaedam veritas, [...]”.

consider to be true or false is not the portrait itself; it is the assertion (or denial) that the portrait represents Caesar¹⁹. As Suárez points out, if concepts can be said to be true simply because they are the concepts of the objects they represent, then every concept will be true in relation to its object, and false in relation to all other things²⁰. This trivial consequence shows, according to Suárez, that truth and falsity “do not consist in a simple similarity or dissimilarity, but in some further comparison or composition, by means of which a thing is attributed either its own concept or the concept of another thing”²¹.

It is worth noting that a very similar point is made by Leibniz against Spinoza’s axiom that “[a] true idea must agree with that of which it is the idea [*cum suo ideato convenire*]”²². When reading the *Ethics* in 1678, Leibniz remarks that this axiom “does not seem very suitable; for every idea agrees with that of which it is the idea, and I do not see what a false idea could be”²³. Elsewhere, he faults Spinoza for not explaining “what a true idea is”²⁴. If the conformity between idea and *ideatum* were a sufficient condition for an idea to be true, then all ideas would be trivially true.

The paradoxical claim that all ideas are true was actually embraced by some Cartesian. I do not know whether Leibniz ever read Robert Desgabets’s *Critique de la Critique de la Recherche de la vérité*, but in Summer 1676, while still in Paris, he had the opportunity to see the manuscript of Foucher’s reply, which included plenty of information about the content of Desgabets’s book²⁵. To counter Foucher’s skepticism about the possibility of attaining clear ideas of soul and matter, Desgabets put forth his epistemological prin-

- 19 See *ibid.*, disp. IX, sect. 1, § 15. Contemporary philosophers of art and mind might object that what makes a certain portrait or concept the portrait or concept of a certain person or thing is not some relation of representational conformity but rather the causal history of that portrait or concept. See, notably, Goodman’s criticism of the view that resemblance is a necessary and sufficient condition for representation (N. Goodman, *Languages of Art. An Approach to a Theory of Symbols*, Indianapolis 1976). On causal accounts of conceptual content, see K. Sterelny, *The Representational Theory of Mind. An Introduction*, Oxford 1990, pp. 111–119. This approach would be alien to Suárez, who maintains that a concept cannot “naturally” represent an object unless it “intentionally” (in the scholastic sense of intentionality) conforms to it (*ibid.*, disp. VIII, sect. 3, § 3).
- 20 The same point had been made by the Coimbraans. See *Commentarii Collegii Conimbricensis e Societate Jesu in universam dialecticam Aristotelis*, Coloniae Agrippinae 1607 (reprint Hildesheim 1976), “In libros de interpretatione”, lib. I, cap. I, quaest. V, art. IV, col. 71.
- 21 Suárez, *Disputationes metaphysicae* (see note 18), disp. VIII, sect. 3, § 4: “[...] veritatem, vel falsitatem cognitionis non consistere in simplici similitudine, vel dissimilitudine, sed in aliqua alia comparatione seu compositione, per quam rei attribuitur proprius conceptus ejus, vel alienus; [...]”.
- 22 B. Spinoza, *Ethics*, ed. and transl. by G. H. R. Parkinson, Oxford 2000, Part I, Axiom 6, p. 76; cf. *Spinoza. Opera*, ed. by C. Gebhardt, 4 vols., Heidelberg 1925, vol. II, p. 47: “Idea vera debet cum suo ideato convenire”.
- 23 A VI, 4 B, N. 337, p. 1766: “[Axioma] parum congruum videtur; omnis enim idea cum suo ideato convenit, nec video quid sit idea falsa”; see also *ibid.*, p. 1775.
- 24 Spinoza defines the adequate idea as “[...] ideam, quae, quatenus in se sine relatione ad objectum consideratur, omnes verae ideae proprietates, sive denominationes intrinsecas habet”, and explains that by “intrinsic” he means to exclude the extrinsic feature, “nempe convenientiam ideae cum suo ideato” (*Ethica*, Part II, Def. 4). Leibniz comments that “explicandum ergo erat, quid sit vera idea, nam p. 1. ax. 7. [sic!] adhibita est solum convenientia cum ideato” (A VI, 4 B, N. 336, p. 1712).
- 25 In August 1678, Foucher writes to Leibniz: “Je n’ay pas encor fait imprimer la reponse à Dom Robert. Vous avez vu cette reponse en manuscrit il y a plus de 2 ans” (A II, 1, N. 183, p. 638).

ciple (recently dubbed “the intentionality principle”²⁶) that all of our ideas are true, in the sense that they all correspond to some actually existing object. This principle was introduced as following from the scholastic distinction between the first and the second mental operation, and therefore as an undisputed principle: “Everyone agrees that this first operation of the mind, the simple conception, is always true and always conforms to its object”²⁷. At first glance, Desgabets was right in claiming to agree with the standard view that there is always conformity between an idea and its object. But in fact, his position radically diverged from the standard view, since he took conformity to entail truth, in the sense of correspondence to an existing object. According to Desgabets, the mere fact that I simply conceive of an object entails that that object exists out of my mind. Thus, Desgabets would deny that all ideas are *trivially* true. He would insist that they are all true in a non-trivial sense, for a situation is conceivable in which they would be false – namely, if they had “no real object outside the understanding”²⁸.

3. Cartesian Truth

Before considering Foucher’s reply to Desgabets, it is useful to take a glance at Leibniz’s reaction to their controversy. In 1686, after receiving a copy of Foucher’s finally published reply, Leibniz read it again and commented as follows:

I move on to your *Examination of the great principle* of the Cartesians and Dom Robert [...], namely that our ideas or conceptions are always true. As I have already said, I am very far from admitting it, because we often join incompatible notions together, so that the compound includes a contradiction. I have examined this principle more thoroughly in a remark on true or false ideas published in the *Acta Eruditorum*²⁹.

26 T.M. Schmalz, *Radical Cartesianism. The French Reception of Descartes*, Cambridge 2002, pp. 131 and 137–140.

27 R. Desgabets, *Critique de la Critique de la Recherche de la vérité*, Paris 1675, p. 56: “Comme tout le monde est d’accord que cette première operation de l’esprit, c’est à dire la conception simple est toujours vraie et conforme à son objet, [...]”.

28 *Ibid.*, p. 59: “[...] s’il pouvoit arriver que nos notions ou conceptions simples n’ayent point d’objet réel hors de l’entendement, toute la certitude que nous avons de la réalité et de l’existence des choses qui sont hors de nous, seroit renversée” (hence, Desgabets’s basic argument is that the admission of the possible falsity of ideas would precipitate us into skepticism). Although Desgabets does not say explicitly that in such a case our ideas would be false, the context leaves little doubt. Foucher is therefore right to take Desgabets’s view to be that “ces conceptions seroient fausses, s’il estoit possible que ce qu’elles nous representent, ne pust veritablement exister hors de nous, telles qu’elles nous le representent”; S. Foucher, *Nouvelle dissertation sur la Recherche de la vérité. Contenant la Reponse à la Critique de la Critique de la Recherche de la vérité*, Paris 1679 [henceforth: *Réponse*], p. 72.

29 A II, 2, N. 16, p. 92: “Je viens à vostre *Examen du grand principe* des Cartesiens et de Dom Robert, [...], sçavoir que nos idées ou conceptions sont tousjours vraies. Et comme j’ay déjà dit, je suis bien éloigné de l’admettre, parce que nous joignons souvent des notions incompatibles, en sorte que le composé enferme contradiction. J’ay examiné plus distinctement ce principe dans une remarque sur les idées vrayes ou fausses, que j’ay mise dans le journal de Leipzig”.

Here, Leibniz clearly refers to his *Meditations on Knowledge, Truth, and Ideas* as containing an examination of Desgabets's principle that all ideas are true. This confirms my hypothesis that Leibniz's primary reason for writing and publishing his *Meditations* was to take a stand on the post-Cartesian debate concerning the truth-valuability of ideas.

On the other hand, Leibniz's claim sounds rather odd, for in the *Meditations*, no mention was made of Desgabets's principle. Yet the quoted passage also reveals that Leibniz follows Foucher in taking Desgabets's principle to be a genuine expression of Cartesian epistemology; in the wake of Foucher, he describes it as the "great principle of the Cartesians and Dom Robert"³⁰. This suggests that, by championing the opposite view that some of our ideas are false, Leibniz also aims to undermine some characteristic tenet of Cartesianism in general.

Of course, Descartes himself never endorsed such a principle, at least not in Desgabets's sense³¹. However, he famously adopted the somewhat akin principle that our clear and distinct ideas are true, which entails that clarity and distinctness provide a criterion for the truth of ideas. This principle appears to be the main target of Leibniz's doctrine of false ideas.

We should bear in mind that Leibniz's reason to reject Desgabets's principle that "our ideas or conceptions are always true" is the fact that "we often join together incompatible notions"³². According to Leibniz's *Meditations*, false ideas are indeed composite concepts whose components are jointly incompatible. Leibniz's examples of impossible things like the fastest motion or the greatest number aim to show that, when dealing with composite concepts, we can have a distinct cognition of ideas that are, in fact, false – not in the sense that they fail to conform to their objects, but in that, being contradictory, they have no possible object. Although clearness and distinctness can tell us something about propositional truth (*veritas enuntiationum*), they tell us nothing about the truth of ideas (*veritas idearum*). Leibniz concedes that the Cartesian principle, if supplemented with his own standards of clearness and distinctness, can offer a sound rule for attributing a property to a subject, but only insofar as we independently know that we are dealing with a true idea³³. The series of distinctions Leibniz traces in his *Meditations* is designed to show that even the content of a clear and distinct cognition can turn out to be a false idea. For it is only at the further level of adequateness that we can know *a priori*

30 See the marginal note at the beginning of Foucher's examination of Desgabets's principle: "Ce principe est celui des Cartesiens. Voyez Descartes metaph. Meditation 5 et ailleurs" (*Réponse*, p. 67). This examination is announced, in the subtitle of Foucher's book, as "une discution particuliere du grand Principe des Cartesiens".

31 Descartes abides by the Suarezian doctrine of simple apprehension. See E. Scribano, "Descartes et les fausses idées", in: *Archives de Philosophie* 64 (2001), pp. 259–278.

32 A II, 2, N. 16, p. 92: "[...] nos idées ou conceptions sont toujours vraies. [...], parce que nous joignons souvent des notions incompatibles, [...]".

33 A VI, 4 A, N. 141, p. 590: "Inutile ergo axioma est, nisi clari et distincti *criteria* adhibeantur, quae tradidimus, et nisi constet de veritate idearum. De caetero non contemnenda veritatis enuntiationum *criteria* sunt regulae *communis Logicae*". A similar distinction between truth of ideas and truth of propositions occurs in Leibniz's remarks on Jaquelot: A II, 4, N. 39, p. 122 (GP III, 449).

that the concept we are entertaining is possible, i. e. logically consistent³⁴. But since that level is hardly ever attained by human thought, we must rely on experience in order to establish the “reality” of our concepts³⁵.

By claiming that there can be some falsity in our mind even before judgment takes place, for the reason that our distinct concepts might involve a contradiction, Leibniz reintroduces a source of error that Descartes had ruled out by invoking God’s veracity as the ultimate guarantee of the truth of clear and distinct ideas. Leibniz’s point is that even such ideas can be “deceptive”³⁶. They deceive us insofar as – due to our “blind” or symbolic mode of thought³⁷ – they appear as genuine ideas of genuine objects, so that we feel allowed to ascribe to those alleged objects the properties that follow from the distinct concepts we have of them, or from the nominal definitions expressing such concepts³⁸.

As is well known, Leibniz takes this to be the weak point of the (later so-called) ontological argument for the existence of God. He agrees with Descartes that the argument is based on a clear and distinct idea of God, namely an idea that can be expressed by a nominal definition³⁹. When Descartes assumes that God is the most perfect being, this definition indeed picks out an essential property of divine nature. The cognition of God as that being which enjoys maximal perfection is distinct insofar as it makes it possible to distinguish God from any other being. However, such a distinct cognition is not sufficient to establish beyond doubt that the Cartesian idea of God is internally consistent, since there are provably inconsistent concepts (e. g. the concept of a fastest motion) which from a cognitive or psychological point of view seem nonetheless clear and distinct. Thus, if we accept the unconditional principle that God’s veracity warrants the truth of all the ideas that are clearly and distinctly cognized, there is no escaping the absurd conclusion that even such inconsistent concepts are true. Most importantly for our purposes, these counterexamples to Cartesian epistemology lead Leibniz to admit a kind of pre-judgmental falsity. Error and deception are possible even at the stage of simple apprehension.

4. Leibniz and Foucher

In order to assess whether this view on falsity is reconcilable with the standard view on truth-bearers, it would be helpful to detect its source. Actually, Foucher himself argues, against Desgabets, that ideas made up of mutually incompatible ideas would turn out to

34 A VI, 4 A, N. 141, pp. 589–590. See L. Couturat, *La logique de Leibniz d’après des documents inédits*, Paris 1901, p. 194.

35 A VI, 4 A, N. 141, p. 590.

36 *Ibid.*, p. 591.

37 *Ibid.*, p. 588.

38 Although Descartes admitted that we sometimes join together mutually incompatible ideas, he took the resulting inconsistent concepts to be necessarily obscure and confused, and hence to constitute no counterexample to the principle of clarity and distinctness. See AT VII, p. 152.

39 On ideas and definitions, see below, section 6.

be false on the very grounds of Desgabets's assumptions⁴⁰. For, Desgabets admits that a simple conception would be false if it had no real object outside the mind. But when we conceive of incompatible things as joined together, argues Foucher, we form a conception that *cannot* have any real object – a conception “whose object cannot possibly exist outside those who form such conceptions”⁴¹. Thus, our ideas of impossible objects provide a counterexample to Desgabets's principle that all ideas or conceptions are true.

To forestall the objection that Desgabets's notion of falsity is restricted to simple conceptions alone, Foucher disambiguates the term “simple”. He points out that, even if conceptions are made up by composition, and although they represent composite objects, they can nevertheless be simple in Desgabets's sense, which conforms to the traditional meaning of “simple apprehension”: a conception is simple if and only if it does not incorporate any judgment. The act of combining ideas to form a composite idea is different from the act of combining ideas to form a judgment, by affirming or denying one idea of another.

Hence, Foucher's reply to Desgabets provides a straightforward characterization of false ideas as composite concepts of impossible objects – a characterization compatible with the Conformity Principle, since falsity does not originate from a difformity between the idea and its object but from the internal inconsistency of the idea itself, which is left without any possible object. All of these features (the composite make-up of the idea, the incompatibility of some of its components, and the impossibility of its object) also characterize Leibniz's false ideas. Since Leibniz saw the manuscript of Foucher's *Réponse* as early as 1676, it could be tempting to regard this text as a source of Leibniz's doctrine.

On the other hand, Foucher did not mean to endorse the aforementioned account of false ideas. As he points out, his entire argument is “ad hominem”⁴². Its premises are drawn from Desgabets's statements, and its aim is to convince Desgabets that his very epistemology entails that, if any idea is said to be true, then some ideas must be said to be false. This does not mean, however, that Foucher is committed to the premises or the conclusion of the argument. On the contrary, he thinks that every ascription of truth-values to ideas ultimately rests on a misunderstanding⁴³. Foucher's own view on the issue is set down in a further argument, claiming (in keeping with the standard view) that ideas lack any truth-value.

Thus, Foucher presents the characterization of false ideas in terms of inconsistency as alternative to the standard view. He deems the claim that inconsistent ideas are false

40 Foucher, *Réponse*, pp. 72–73.

41 *Ibid.*, p. 74: “Donc on peut avoir de simples conceptions qui soient fausses, puis qu'on en peut avoir dont il est impossible que l'objet existe hors de ceux qui forment ces conceptions”.

42 See *ibid.*, p. 71.

43 In Foucher's reconstruction, Desgabets infers that ideas are true from the traditional assumption that they cannot be false. This premise might be sound, concedes Foucher, but the conclusion does not follow from it: “Quand il seroit vray que nos simples conceptions ne seroient point fausses, il ne s'ensuivroit pas pour cela qu'elles fussent vrayes: Car elles ne sont à proprement parler, ny vrayes, ny fausses, puis qu'elles ne contiennent, comme vous le supposez, aucune affirmation, ny aucune negation” (*ibid.*, p. 80).

incompatible with the scholastic theory of simple apprehension, or at least with the soundest versions of it: “To avoid ambiguity and obscurity, the most enlightened [Scholastics] maintain that the *first apprehension* [...] is neither liable to falsity nor to truth”⁴⁴. This makes it hardly plausible that Foucher might be the source of Leibniz’s characterization of false ideas as inconsistent concepts. For, would Leibniz have ever endorsed a view that Foucher presented as a departure from the soundest scholastic theory?

5. Leibniz and Aquinas

The solution adopted by Leibniz in 1684 did not, in fact, depart from tradition, since a similar view had been advanced by Aquinas⁴⁵. Concerning the issue of whether there can be falsity in our intellectual cognition, Aquinas sticks to the distinction between the first and the second operation of the intellect, and maintains that truth and falsity can be found only in the second. The first operation, consisting in the apprehension of an essence or *quidditas rei*, is conceived by him as analogous to sense cognition: both the sensual and the intellectual apprehension are immune to error, as in both cases the cognitive faculty merely receives (or is “informed” by) the likeness of its object. And since essences are the proper object of the intellect, the intellect cannot be mistaken in cognizing essences. Error arises when the intellect, through its second operation, attributes to a certain thing something that does not follow from (or is even incompatible with) its essence.

Nevertheless, while stating that the intellect in its first operation is essentially (*per se*) free from falsity, Aquinas also admits that falsity can accidentally (*per accidens*) affect it. Since this accidental falsity concerns our apprehension of essences by means of definitions, it is worth mentioning that, according to Aquinas, definitions are included within the scope of the first operation. A definition is the “sign” or the linguistic expression of the first operation, just as a declarative sentence (*enuntiatio*) is the “sign” of the second operation, stating that something is or is not the case⁴⁶. Aquinas’s point is clearer if we assume that by ‘definition’ he specifically means the defining phrase or *definiens*, which merely describes an essence, without stating anything; such as when we say that “rational animal” is the definition of “man”. As by simply uttering “rational animal” one makes no statement, that utterance cannot be false. Accordingly, if one conceives of a rational animal, one cannot be mistaken but is merely apprehending an essence.

44 Ibid., p. 82: “[...] les plus éclairés [Scolastiques], pour éviter l’équivoque et l’obscurité, soutiennent que la *première apprehension* [...] [n]’est point susceptible de fausseté, ny de verité”.

45 On Leibniz’s acquaintance with Aquinas’s doctrines, see below, “Concluding Remarks”.

46 See *In 1 Sent.*, dist. 19, quaest. 5, art. 1: “[...] veritas et falsitas proprie invenitur in secunda operatione, et in signo eius, quod est enuntiatio, et non in prima, vel signo eius quod est definitio, nisi secundum quid”. Aquinas’s works are quoted from the *Corpus Thomisticum. Sancti Thomae de Aquino Opera Omnia*, ed. by Enrique Alarcón (www.corpusthomicum.org/), which follows the Leonine edition of *Sancti Thomae de Aquino opera omnia iussu Leonis XIII. P.M.*, Romae 1882 ff, where it is possible.

In spite of their belonging to the first operation, definitions can be false in two cases. In the first case, the definition of one thing is taken by the intellect as the definition of another thing, so that “the definition of the one thing is false of the other thing”⁴⁷. The crucial case, however, is the second⁴⁸, for here the definition turns out to be false *simpliciter*, and not only with respect to this or that thing (*secundum hanc rem*)⁴⁹. This happens when the intellect composes a definition by combining parts that are not compatible with one another⁵⁰. Topical examples given by Aquinas are compositions like “a four-footed rational animal”⁵¹, or the definition of vacuum as “the place in which there is no body”⁵². Aquinas’s account of false definitions presupposes the Aristotelian-Porphyrian method of definition by genus and difference, whereby the genus is divided in order to attain the definition of a species. “In this process falsity can take place”, namely if the genus is divided by a difference that in fact does not apply to that genus⁵³. The resulting definition “is false in itself, involving the composition of impossible things”⁵⁴.

We may certainly wonder whether things like “the winged rational animal”⁵⁵ are really impossible and in what sense, since we do not see any contradiction in being winged *and* rational. Aquinas would probably answer that a genus and a difference are mutually incompatible if they do not belong to the same branch of the Porphyrian tree. The range of all the possible divisions of a genus is determined by the actual ordering of natural kinds. A definition like “winged rational animal”, formed by picking up properties that never occur jointly in the same individual, is thus incoherent and describes an impossible object. Hence, Aquinas writes that a definition like “four-footed flying animal” is false if it is taken as the definition of a thing, for the reason that “no animal is such”⁵⁶. A definition is false if it does not apply to anything⁵⁷.

Leibniz has, of course, very different views about modalities, plenitude, and natural kinds. However, there are striking similarities between his and Aquinas’s account of

47 *Summa Theol.*, I^a, quaest. 17, art. 3: “intellectus definitionem unius attribuit alteri; [...] Unde definitio unius rei est falsa de altera”. See also *In 1 Sent.*, dist. 19, quaest. 5, art. 1 (“tunc dicitur definitio falsa respectu alicuius et non simpliciter”); *De Anima*, III, lectio XI, § 763 (“prout definitio unius rei est falsa ad aliam rem”).

48 In *Contra Gent.*, lib. III, cap. 108, only this second case is mentioned.

49 *Contra Gent.*, lib. I, cap. 59.

50 “*Alio modo secundum quod definitio constituitur ex partibus, quae non sunt invicem componibiles*” (*In Metaph.*, IX, lectio XI, § 1908). The point is also expressed by saying that parts “simul sociari non possunt” (*Summa Theol.*, I^a, quaest. 17, art. 3), “sibi non cohaerent” (*Summa Theol.*, I^a, quaest. 58, art. 5), “non cohaerent invicem” (*Contra Gent.*, lib. I, cap. 59; see also *De Anima*, III, lectio XI, § 763), “non possunt componi ad invicem” (*De Veritate*, quaest. 1, art. 3)

51 See, respectively, *Summa Theol.*, I^a, quaest. 17, art. 3. Further examples: “animal quadrupes volatile” (*Summa Theol.*, I^a, quaest. 58, art. 5), “animal rationale alatum” (*Summa Theol.*, I^a, quaest. 85, art. 6), “animal insensibile” (*Contra Gent.*, lib. I, cap. 59; *De Veritate*, quaest. 1, art. 3; *In Metaph.*, IX, lectio XI, § 1908; *De Anima*, III, lectio XI, § 763).

52 *In 1 Sent.*, dist. 19, quaest. 5, art. 1.

53 *Contra Gent.*, lib. III, cap. 108.

54 *Summa Theol.*, I^a, quaest. 85, art. 6.

55 See note 51.

56 *Summa Theol.*, I^a, quaest. 58, art. 5.

57 See *In Metaph.*, VI, lectio IV, § 1237: “Et similiter definitio dicitur falsa aut quia nullius, vel quia assignatur alteri quam ei cuius est”.

pre-judgmental falsity as inconsistency due to incompatible components. Leibniz, like Aquinas, maintains that falsity requires some degree of complexity, for incompatibility can take place only among a plurality of components. Conversely, concepts that are not composed of simpler concepts cannot be false, nor can we be deceived in cognizing them. Accordingly, such “primitive” notions, lacking “component marks”, are “indefinable”⁵⁸: no composition, no definition, no possible falsity.

6. Ideas and Definitions

Even though Aquinas speaks of “false definitions” whereas Leibniz speaks of “false ideas”, it is possible to argue that, for Leibniz, too, the proper locus of pre-judgmental falsity is definition. Ideas might happen to be false only insofar as they are definable, and they are indeed false if their defining marks are not all compatible. Leibniz himself tended to regard definitions as expressions of the first mental operation rather than as propositions⁵⁹.

Consider, for instance, the narrow link between “idea” and “definition” in Leibniz’s criticism of Descartes’s proof of God’s existence. In Leibniz’s reconstruction of the proof, a pivotal role is played by the “idea or definition” of God, as announced by the major premise: “Whatever follows from the *idea or definition* of anything can be predicated of that thing”⁶⁰. As mentioned above, Leibniz’s objection is that the Cartesian should prove that God is possible, since the conclusion that God exists is drawn from a nominal definition of God as “the most perfect being” (or, in the Anselmian version, “that of which no greater can be thought”), but this definition could involve a contradiction⁶¹, in which case the Cartesian idea of God would be false.

By the way, the Anselmian version of the *a priori* argument was known to Leibniz primarily through Aquinas’s refutation⁶², a certain interpretation of which he presented – in the early 1680s – as substantially in agreement with his own criticism⁶³. To some extent, Leibniz saw Aquinas as an ally against Cartesianism. Wondering how to define

58 A VI, 4 A, N. 141, p. 587.

59 A nominal definition is “enumeratio notarum sufficientium” – sufficient to distinguish the defined thing from all other things (A VI, 4 A, N. 141, p. 587). In the essays on logical calculus of 1679, a definition is a composite term equivalent to (i. e., expressing the same thing as) the *definitum* (i. e., the simple term introduced by stipulation to be the “name” of the thing): see A VI, 4 A, N. 69, pp. 287–288, and N. 70, pp. 294–296. Note, however, that in the same text the word *definitio* is used as well to refer to the whole proposition stipulating the equivalence between the composite and the simple term (*ibid.*, N. 69, p. 288).

60 A VI, 4 A, N. 141, p. 588 (emphasis added): “Quicquid ex alicujus rei idea sive definitione sequitur, id de re potest praedicari”.

61 *Ibid.*

62 See “De veritatibus, de mente, de Deo, de universo” (1676), A VI, 3, N. 71, p. 510.

63 See “De synthesi et analysi universali” (1683–1685), A VI, 4 A, N. 129, p. 542. On Leibniz’s attitude toward Aquinas’s refutation, see K. Cramer, “Leibniz als Interpret des Einwandes des Thomas von Aquin gegen den ontologischen Gottesbeweis”, in: I. Marchlewitz / A. Heinekamp (ed.), *Leibniz’ Auseinandersetzung mit Vorgängern und Zeitgenossen (= Studia Leibnitiana, Supplementa XXVII)*, Stuttgart 1988, pp. 72–99; E. Scribano, *L’esistenza di Dio. Storia della prova ontologica da Descartes a Kant*, Rome 2021 (1. edition Rome 1994), pp. 155–161.

true and false ideas, he plausibly realized that Aquinas's theory of false definitions authorized an alternative, non-Cartesian account of the truth-valuability of ideas, which justified a concern about the possible falsity of the Cartesian idea of God, in spite of Descartes's assurance that this idea is the truest of all⁶⁴.

Earlier, before the Paris period, Leibniz maintained that definitions are arbitrary, hence not liable to falsity. In the 1672 *Accessio ad arithmeticae infinitorum*, after claiming that the only propositions admissible in philosophy are those immediately known through the senses and those that are demonstrated "either from a clear and distinct imagination, i. e. *idea*, or from a definition, which is the expression [*significatio*] of the idea", he excepts "the definitions themselves, which, as Galilei [...] repeatedly claims, are arbitrary and not chargeable with falsity but only with ineptitude and obscurity"⁶⁵.

Later, after reflecting on such composite notions as the fastest movement and the most perfect being, Leibniz changed his mind not only with respect to the arbitrariness of definitions but also with respect to the possible falsity of ideas and definitions⁶⁶. The latter step, however, required finding a way to ascribe falsity to pre-judgmental items without violating the Conformity Principle. A promising way to do so was suggested by Aquinas's account of false definitions. In Leibniz's mature writings, the two steps (concerning arbitrariness and falsity, respectively) are presented as complementary⁶⁷. That is why truth and falsity of ideas are mostly mentioned in tandem with the distinction between nominal and real definitions. Both doctrines originated from the same concern⁶⁸.

7. Leibniz and Locke

Thus, Leibniz's 1684 claim that ideas are, in a sense, either true or false had a precedent within the scholastic tradition and was not inconsistent with his endorsement of the traditional view on the bearers of truth and falsity. A prominent scholastic doctrine such

64 See AT VII, pp. 46 and 68.

65 A III, 1, N. 2, p. 12: "[...] nullam recipiendam esse propositionem nisi quae aut sensus observatione immediata constet, aut ex clara distinctaque imaginatione, id est *idea*, vel quae *idea* significatio est, definitione, sit demonstrata exceptis scilicet ipsis definitionibus, quae ut toties in suis scriptis inculcat restaurator philosophiae Galilaeus, arbitrariae sunt, nec falsitatis, sed ineptiae obscuritatisque tantum arguendae".

66 As late as 1679, Leibniz still writes that a definition is "hypothesis quaedam, de cujus veritate disputari non debet, sed tantum an sit apta, clara, prudenter assumpta" (A VI, 4 A, N. 69, p. 288). However, here *definitio* means the stipulation that an arbitrarily chosen name is equivalent to a given composite term: "Itaque definitio est propositio cujus ratio non redditur, sed quam compendii tantum causa adhibemus" (ibid.). On this ambiguity in the use of *definitio*, see above, note 57.

67 See A II, 4, N. 39, p. 116 (GP III, 443): "Les definitions ne sont point arbitraires comme Hobbes a crû, et on ne peut point former les idées comme l'on veut, quoyqu'il semble que les Cartesiens le prennent ainsi. Car il faut que ces idées qu'on pretend former soyent veritables, c'est à dire possibles, et que les ingrediens qu'on y met, soyent compatibles entre eux".

68 See, e. g., Leibniz to Christiaan Huygens, 3/13 October 1690, A II, 2, N. 88, p. 350: "[J]e voyois que l'argument [de Descartes] est effectivement demonstratif, quand on accorde que Dieu est possible. Cela me fit remarquer, qu'on ne sçauroit se fier sur une demonstration lors qu'on n'est pas assureé de la possibilité du sujet. [...] Cela me donna occasion de faire cette distinction entre les definitions reelles et nominelles [...]. Et je jugeay aussi que c'estoit là le moyen de discerner les idées vraies et fausses".

as the Thomistic account of simple apprehension allowed some pre-judgmental items to be true or false, in the same sense accepted by Leibniz in 1684.

Some twenty years later, Leibniz commented as follows in the *New Essays*: “It is true that I have also attributed truth to ideas, by saying that ideas are either true or false; but what I mean by that is the truth of the proposition which affirms that the object of the idea is possible”⁶⁹. At first glance, Leibniz adopts here a charitable attitude toward his previous statements: by saying that ideas are true or false, he simply meant to say that, for every idea *i*, the proposition that the object of *i* is possible is true or false. This self-interpretation seems to be at odds with our claim that Leibniz’s ascription of truth and falsity to ideas was not merely a figure of speech⁷⁰. Is our interpretation wrong or is Leibniz’s self-interpretation untruthful? Perhaps neither is the case.

Another passage from the *New Essays* addresses Locke’s position on true and false ideas, which conforms to the standard view: “Truth and Falshood belong, in Propriety of Speech, only to propositions”⁷¹. However, Locke adds that ideas may be said to be true or false when the mind “refers” them to “any thing extraneous to them [...]. Because the Mind in such a reference, makes a tacit supposition of their Conformity to that Thing” – namely, the supposition that the idea conforms to what other people call by the same name, or to what really exists, or “to the real Constitution, and Essence of any thing”⁷². Leibniz dislikes such a manifold characterization and proposes instead “to call ideas *true* or *false* by reference to another tacit *affirmation* which they all include, namely the affirmation of [their] possibility. Thus, possible ideas are *true* and impossible ideas are *false*”⁷³.

This passage makes it clear that the proposition affirming that the object of a certain idea is possible is not extrinsic to the idea itself, but is somehow included in it. Every idea contains the tacit affirmation that its object is possible, and since this affirmation is true or false, the idea itself can be said to be true or false. Ideas inherit, so to speak, the truth-value of the possibility statement they incorporate. If such a proposition is intrinsic to the idea, it makes more sense to maintain both that, strictly speaking, truth-values pertain to propositions alone, and that the idea itself turns out to be, in a derivative way, true or false. In the next section, I try to detect the source of this doctrine and to specify its relation to the 1684 doctrine of true and false ideas.

69 “Nouveaux essais sur l’entendement humain”, IV, V, § 11, A VI, 6, N. 2, p. 398: “Il est vrai que j’ai attribué aussi la vérité aux idées en disant que les Idées sont vrayes ou fausses; mais alors je l’entends en effet de la vérité des propositions qui affirment la possibilité de l’objet de l’Idée”; for the translation see G. W. Leibniz. *New Essays on Human Understanding*, transl. and ed. by P. Remnant and J. Bennett, Cambridge 1996 (hereafter: Remnant/Bennett), p. 398.

70 According to R. Kauppi, *Über die Leibnizsche Logik. Mit besonderer Berücksichtigung des Problems der Intension und der Extension* (= *Acta Philosophica Fennica* 12), Helsinki 1960, p. 84, in the *New Essays* Leibniz is pointing out that “true” and “false”, when applied to concepts, are used “in a figurative sense”.

71 J. Locke, *An Essay concerning Human Understanding*, edited by P. H. Nidditch, Oxford 1979, II, XXXII, § 1.

72 *Ibid.*, II, XXXII, §§ 4–5.

73 “Nouveaux essais sur l’entendement humain”, II, XXXII, § 5, A VI, 6, N. 2, p. 269: “[...] j’aime mieux appeler les idées vrayes ou fausses par rapport à une autre affirmation tacite, qu’elles renferment toutes, qui est celle de la possibilité. Ainsi les idées possibles sont vrayes, et les idées impossibles sont fausses”; the translation is in: Remnant/Bennett, p. 269.

8. Implicit Judgments

In the first place, we may rule out the hypothesis that Leibniz, in the *New Essays*, has changed his mind or aims to revise his previous doctrine so as to align himself with the standard (and Lockean) view – as has been suggested⁷⁴. For, the *New Essays*' thesis is not unprecedented. It already appears in 1686, when Leibniz has certainly not changed his mind, nor feels any revisionary impulse. In the afore-mentioned letter to Foucher, after explaining how ideas can be false and what the difference is between nominal and real definitions, Leibniz concludes: "That is why our ideas include a judgment. It is only in this that the demonstration of God's existence that was invented by Anselm and renewed by Descartes is defective"⁷⁵. As the context makes clear, the judgment our ideas are said to include is about the possibility of their object⁷⁶. Obviously enough, this implicit judgment is nothing but the tacit affirmation later mentioned in the *New Essays*.

Leibniz's point in the 1686 letter is that his views on ideas and definitions explain *why* our ideas include a judgment. This clarification hints at a passage from Foucher's book that Leibniz is discussing. As mentioned above, Foucher develops two lines of attack against Desgabets's principle that all ideas are true. He claims, on the one hand, that if ideas can be true, then some of them must be false, and on the other hand, that ideas are, strictly speaking, neither true nor false. But he also sketches a further argument: "Firstly, I reply to you that it is uncertain whether we have any idea or conception that is perfectly simple and includes no judgment"⁷⁷. Thus, Foucher's first strategy to undermine Desgabets's epistemology consists in casting doubt on its cornerstone – the assumption that there is a sharp divide between the first and the second mental operation. If every idea includes a judgment, if when conceiving of an object we are already, albeit implicitly, stating something about it, then strictly speaking there is no *simple* apprehension. Hence, Desgabets is wrong to argue that ideas are true on the ground that there cannot be falsity in our simple apprehensions. For, whenever the implicit judgment is false, the idea itself will turn out to be false.

Foucher does not specify the content of this embryonic judgment. In making his point, however, he is likely to have a scholastic doctrine in mind. Suárez, for instance, allowed the presence of a "virtual judgment" within simple apprehension, by which we implicitly judge that the thing actually is what we know it to be⁷⁸. Our simple cognitions can be true even before we judge because we are already implicitly judging that things

74 See the account by G. Schulz, *Veritas est adaequatio intellectus et rei. Untersuchungen zur Wahrheitslehre des Thomas von Aquin und zur Kritik Kants an einem überlieferten Wahrheitsbegriff* (= *Studien und Texte zur Geistesgeschichte des Mittelalters* 36), Leiden 1993, p. 109.

75 A II, 2, N. 16, p. 92: "C'est pourquoi nos idées enferment un jugement. Ce n'est qu'en cela que la démonstration de l'Existence de Dieu, inventée par Anselme, et renouvelée par des Cartes est defectueuse".

76 See B. Russell, *A Critical Exposition of the Philosophy of Leibniz*, London 1937 (1. edition Cambridge 1900), p. 19. Russell's only concern, however, is to show that the involved proposition is synthetic.

77 Foucher, *Réponse*, p. 71.

78 Suárez, *Disputationes metaphysicae* (see note 18), disp. VIII, sect. 4, § 6: "[Q]uatenus illamet apprehensio est aliqua rei cognitio, est etiam aliqua iudicium, quo implicite iudicatur res id esse, quod de illa cognoscimus". See also sect. 3, § 6.

are as we conceive them. Locke's position is similar (see above). Our ideas can be said to be true or false in virtue of the tacit supposition we make about their conformity to things in the world, or to the ordinary reference of names, or to real essences.

Leibniz's position is different in that he takes the implicit judgment to be about the consistency of the idea, which is to say the possibility of its object⁷⁹. He agrees with Locke that ideas are true or false in virtue of a tacit affirmation, but he specifies the content of this affirmation as being about possibility, not conformity. Once more, Leibniz's reaction to Foucher's arguments is illuminating. Consider again Foucher's three responses to Desgabets's principle:

- (F1) Strictly speaking, ideas are neither true nor false.
- (F2) It may be that every idea involves a judgment, hence no idea is simple.
- (F3) Composite ideas that represent impossible objects are false.

In some important respects, these claims are akin to Leibniz's claims (L1), (L2), and (L3). However, whereas Foucher's claims appear to be unrelated or even jointly inconsistent, Leibniz clearly expects us to take his own three claims to be not only jointly compatible but also connected with one another. His expectation is less puzzling if we consider again the Thomistic precedent.

According to Aquinas, a definition is false if its parts are incompatible. But why, in the case of definitions, does incompatibility result in falsity? Because – answers Aquinas – definitions of composite things involve some kind of *complexio* or judgment⁸⁰. In the process of defining, the first operation incorporates something pertaining to the second operation⁸¹. Although definitions are not statements, they cannot be formed without some act of affirmation or denial. Thus, definitions acquire the truth-value of the judgment they involve. Inconsistent definitions are paradigmatically false, since they involve an affirmation that is not just false, but even impossible⁸². For instance, the definition

79 See A II, 4, N. 39, p. 116 (GP III, 443): “[T]ous ces raisonnemens supposent tacitement la vérité des idées, ou ce qui vaut autant, la possibilité de la chose”.

80 See *Contra Gent.*, lib. I, cap. 59: there can be falsity “per accidens” in the simple apprehension of an essence, “inquantum vel definitio includit aliquam complexionem, vel partium definitionis ad invicem, vel totius definitionis ad definitum”.

81 See *Contra Gent.*, lib. III, cap. 108: “In operatione autem intellectus qua apprehendit *quod quid est*, non accidit falsum nisi per accidens, secundum quod in hac operatione permiscetur aliquid de operatione intellectus componentis et dividensis. Quod quidem contingit inquantum intellectus noster non statim, sed cum quodam inquisitionis ordine ad cognoscendam quidditatem alicuius rei pertingit: sicut cum primo apprehendimus *animal*, et dividentes per oppositas differentias, altera relicta, unam generi apponimus, quousque perveniamus ad definitionem speciei”.

82 See *In 1 Sent.*, dist. 19, quaest. 5, art. 1: “[P]er accidens admiscetur falsitas, scilicet ratione affirmationis vel negationis annexae, quod contingit dupliciter: vel ex comparatione definitionis ad definitum [...]; vel in respectu partium definitionis ad invicem, in quibus implicatur impossibilis affirmatio; sicut definitio vacui, quod est locus in quo nullum corpus est; et haec definitio dicitur falsa simpliciter”.

“insensible animal” is false because it implies the false “composition” (i. e. judgment) that some animal is insensible⁸³. Hence, Aquinas’s position may be outlined as follows:

- (A₁) The primary and proper bearers of truth and falsity are the intellectual acts of affirming and denying.
- (A₂) Nevertheless, even simple apprehensions are, secondarily and *per accidens*, truth-valuable, in so far as they involve a judgmental act.
- (A₃) For this reason, definitions made up of incompatible components are to be evaluated as false.

Considered in this perspective, Aquinas’s theory of truth and falsity provides a pattern for assembling Leibniz’s three claims, (L₁), (L₂), and (L₃), into an organic and coherent account.

Concluding Remarks

The results of the present investigation raise two further issues, which I would like to briefly address here by way of conclusion. One might wonder, first, whether the similarity we have found between Aquinas’s and Leibniz’s doctrines is a mere accident or an instance of the former’s influence on the latter. The fact that Leibniz’s references to Aquinas are neither abundant nor very accurate makes it difficult to conclusively answer this question as well as to settle the general issue of Leibniz’s relation to Thomism – which indeed remains a *desideratum* of Leibniz scholarship.

Although Leibniz did not approach Aquinas’s doctrines with the philological accuracy that we would expect from a historian of medieval philosophy, and although it is possible that he even lacked first-hand knowledge of Aquinas’s works, he indisputably took a genuine interest in the Thomistic treatment of several philosophical and theological issues⁸⁴. The practice of comparing specific Leibnizian doctrines with their possible Thomistic precedents is by now well established in scholarship – especially with reference to the metaphysics of substance and the problem of evil⁸⁵. As concerns our episte-

83 See *De Veritate*, quaest. 1, art. 3: “Unde diffinitio dicitur vera vel falsa ratione compositionis verae vel falsae, ut quando scilicet dicitur esse diffinitio eius cuius non est, sicut si diffinitio circuli assignetur triangulo, vel etiam quando partes diffinitionis non possunt componi ad invicem, ut si dicatur diffinitio alicuius rei animal insensibile: haec enim compositio quae implicatur, scilicet aliquod animal est insensibile, est falsa”.

84 See A. Côté, “Leibniz historien de la philosophie. Le cas Thomas d’Aquin”, in: *Il cannocchiale* 1 (1999), pp. 35–58.

85 See e. g. M. R. Antognazza, “Metaphysical Evil Revisited”, in: L. M. Jorgensen / S. Newlands (eds.), *New Essays on Leibniz’s Theodicy*, Oxford 2014, pp. 112–134; S. Di Bella, “Angels, Matter, and Haecceity. Scholastic Topoi for Leibnizian Individuation”, in: *Studia Leibnitiana* 46 (2014), pp. 127–151; E. Pasini, “Essential Differences. Or, an Exercise in Symptomatic History of Philosophy”, in: A. Nita (ed.), *Leibniz’s Metaphysics and Adoption of Substantial Forms*, Dordrecht et al. 2015, pp. 59–72; and A. Echavarría, “La perfection de l’univers, le mal et l’incarnation selon Thomas d’Aquin et Leibniz”, in: V. Carraud (ed.), *L’or dans la boue. Leibniz et les philosophies antiques et médiévales*, Paris 2021, pp. 361–383.

mological topic, the only explicit mention of Aquinas occurs in Leibniz's discussion of the related issue concerning the ontological argument. In my opinion, however, the substantial agreement between Aquinas's account of pre-judgmental falsity and Leibniz's is a clue as to the latter's acquaintance with the former's doctrines (although, of course, it cannot be taken as conclusive evidence of this).

It is worth noting that Aquinas's answer to the question of whether simple apprehensions can be false was well known to early modern scholastics. As Descartes scholars have pointed out⁸⁶, the doctrine of *falsitas per accidens* was endorsed by the Coimbrans in their commentary on Aristotle's *De Interpretatione*. According to the Coimbrans, simple cognitions that are "virtually complex" (e.g. "the concepts of a white man" or "a broken oar", representing "an object which is in some way composite") can be said to be accidentally false in two senses: either intrinsically, if we consider that every cognition of this kind "radically involves" a judgment, or extrinsically, if we consider this cognition as the "occasion for forming a false proposition"⁸⁷. Referring to Aquinas, the Coimbrans take definitions to be paradigmatic of such virtually complex cognitive items, which are liable to accidental falsity. An inconsistent definition like "four-footed rational animal" can be said either to involve a false affirmation or to occasion the formation of a false proposition (namely, that some rational animals are four-footed), and therefore to be either intrinsically or extrinsically false by accident. Thus, in addition to providing a possible source of Descartes's doctrine of material falsity, the Coimbrans' revival of *falsitas per accidens* may also constitute a (direct or indirect) link between Aquinas and Leibniz⁸⁸.

The second issue concerns the reasons that may have led Leibniz to adopt precisely such a complex view of ideas as truth-bearers. My suggestion is that Leibniz was drawn to an account of this sort because it was conducive to blurring the boundaries between the first and the second mental operation. Once pre-judgmental items like ideas are acknowledged to involve a possibility statement that makes them true or false according to its own truth-value, the distinction between the mental act of simply apprehending or conceiving of an object and the further act of forming a judgment about that object loses some of its traditional significance. This outcome actually converged with a basic orientation of Leibniz's logic, namely his effort to reduce the logic of propositions to the logic of concepts or terms, so as to account for truth in terms of relations of con-

86 See D. Behan, "Descartes and Conceptual Falsity (*falsitas materialis*)", in: *The Modern Schoolman* 85 (2008), pp. 89–115; N.J. Wells, "Descartes and the Coimbrans on Material Falsity", in: *The Modern Schoolman* 85 (2008), pp. 271–316.

87 *Commentarii Collegii Conimbricensis* (see note 20), "In libros de interpretatione", lib. I, cap. I, quaest. V, art. IV, col. 71–72; quoted from *The Conimbricenses, Some Questions on Signs*, transl. by J. P. Doyle, Milwaukee 2001, pp. 167–169.

88 A further plausible link is the above-mentioned *Port-Royal Logic*, which acknowledges that complex terms, unlike simple ideas, can contain some falsehood due to an express or virtual judgment they include: Arnauld/Nicole, *La logique ou l'art de penser* (see note 16), p. 125. For instance, a defining relative clause like "Les esprits qui sont quarrés" can be said to be false insofar as it implicitly affirms the compatibility ("convenance possible") between the property of being a mind and the property of being square, which are in fact mutually incompatible (p. 127).

cept containment or class inclusion⁸⁹. Of course, Leibniz agreed that the bearers of truth and falsity are propositions (or “possible thoughts”)⁹⁰. However, in his logical papers he did not refrain from ascribing truth and falsity to non-complex (i. e. sub-propositional) terms, nor from searching for a definition of truth and falsity that could apply to both propositions and terms⁹¹. In such contexts, Leibniz even considered reducing truth to possibility or intelligibility⁹² and falsity to impossibility (i. e. logical inconsistency). Thus, his longstanding concern with the epistemological and metaphysical issue of false ideas appears to be in keeping with a fundamental branch of his logical investigations.

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89 See M. Mugnai, “‘Ars characteristica’, Logical Calculus, and Natural Languages”, in: M. R. Antognazza (ed.), *The Oxford Handbook of Leibniz*, Oxford 2018, pp. 177–207, esp. 188–189.

90 See “Dialogus” (1677), A VI, 4 A, N. 8, p. 21: “Vides ergo veritatem esse propositionum seu cogitationum, sed possibilium, [...]”.

91 See “Generales inquisitiones” (1686), esp. § 55–61, A VI, 4 A, N. 165, p. 757–758.

92 See “De vero et falso, affirmatione et negatione, et de contradictoriis” (1686), A VI, 4 A, N. 164, p. 736.