

Prospects for Nothing:
Representing Nonbeing and the Metaphysics of Intentionality in
Aquinas, Spinoza, and Leibniz

PhD Dissertation

Zachary Gartenberg (Johns Hopkins University)

Introduction¹

This dissertation is not a monograph but an exhibition of three independent articles I published as a doctoral student:

- “On the Causal Role of Privation in Thomas Aquinas’s Metaphysics,” *European Journal of Philosophy* 28 (2020): 306-322. [Henceforth, “CR”]
- “Spinoza on Relations,” in *A Companion to Spinoza*, edited by Yitzhak Y. Melamed (Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 2021). [Henceforth, “SR”]
- “Brandom’s Leibniz,” *Pacific Philosophical Quarterly* 102 (2021): 73-102. [Henceforth, “BL”]

The papers concern, respectively, Thomas Aquinas’s views on privation and causation; Baruch Spinoza’s views on relations; and contemporary philosopher Robert Brandom’s interpretation of Gottfried Leibniz’s metaphysical account of perceptual distinctness. Each paper illuminates the

¹ Note: Readers may want to look at the present essay only after reading the three independent articles that comprise the main part of this dissertation. As a reflective synthesis of major parts of these articles, the present essay goes beyond their content and develops a relatively independent and substantive line of thought. If one wishes first to gain one’s own purchase on the constituent articles before reflecting on their combined philosophical significance, then reading them first is a good option. Alternatively, if one wishes to experience the articles as informed by larger considerations from the start – and to grasp the methodological considerations that justify viewing them as connected in this way – then this opening essay is the right place to begin.

thought of the historical figure with whom it deals textually and in relation to present-day philosophical issues and ideas.²

In this introductory essay, I explicate the respective content of my three papers, bringing out the philosophical potential of viewing them together. I reflect on their common orientation around a specific theme: the possibility of thinking about what does not exist—of representing nonbeing. As I propose in the first part of this introduction, however, Aquinas, Spinoza, and Leibniz are attuned to a more specific problem: *how we can represent what cannot be represented as existing*. My main objective in this first part is to unpack this idea and to show how it organizes their thinking. This prepares the way for the bulk of my presentation in parts 2-4. Here I examine our protagonists' perspectives on this question, cued to the content of my articles. I conclude, in section 5, by briefly giving voice to the Leibnizian insight motivating me to present my selection of these articles as driven by a *principle*.³

1. Thinking about What Cannot Be Thought of as Existing

Our ordinary and philosophical ways of speaking and thinking about non-existent objects are ubiquitously couched as talk and thought about *things* that do not exist.⁴ We have names for *people*, *places*, and *particular objects* that do not exist; *properties* that do not exist; *events* that never occur; *facts* or *states of affairs* that never obtain; *things* that have been genuinely supposed to exist but do not; *objects* mistakenly thought to exist by those who are hallucinating; fictional *characters*; *objects* of fantasy and imagination; and so on.

² Abbreviations of titles of the works of Aquinas, Spinoza, and Leibniz referenced in this introduction are provided before the bibliography and correspond to the methods of citation used in CR, SR, and BL. Abbreviations for specific editions are listed among the secondary sources in the bibliography.

³ My elaboration of these issues in the main body of the introduction will be fairly impressionistic, being intended to prompt association and reflection. Heavier textual corroboration and engagement will be kept mostly in the notes.

⁴ The list below is derived from Crane 2013, 14-15.

As the items on this list reveal, the scope and nature of our thought about non-existing objects is resolutely based on the way in which we think about existing things. This reveals an assumption endemic to philosophical—and ordinary—discourse about the nature of the objects of thought: for something even to *be* an object of thought, it must be capable of being *represented* as existing.⁵

Aquinas, Spinoza, and Leibniz are not consumed by this way of thinking. They believe that we can have an idea *I* of an object φ which includes the representation of φ as something that essentially cannot be represented as existing, i.e., which essentially cannot be represented as having a referent *at all*. For Aquinas, φ could be a *privation*; for Spinoza, it could be a *relation*; and for Leibniz, φ might initially seem like it could be *itself* an idea, namely, the idea of unconscious perception.⁶

Underlying this notion of an *I*-type idea⁷ is the view that it is not fundamentally a fact about *objects* of thought that determines whether we conceive of them or not: it is mistaken to assume

⁵ Philosophically, this view might be traced to (or identified with) the assumption that all thinking must refer, which relies on the basic dual presuppositions of quantification. When we quantify, we quantify over *objects* in a domain: to be, is to be the value of a bound variable. And we must presuppose that *all* such objects are *something*, that they exhaust the relevant domain: everything is something. For this point, see Caston (1999, 164), who situates it in historical perspective. See also Crane 2013, 16-17.

⁶ Ideas of impossible or self-contradictory objects (such as that of a square circle or of a chimera) might also fit the description, but such ideas arguably lack what I will exhibit as the explanatory potential of ideas of relations, privations, and an idea like that of unconscious perception. They may, however, be a source of edification about the kinds of things we can have ideas of. It is worth noting here that Francisco Suárez, whom I quote just below, distinguishes relations and privations, as beings of reason that have a foundation in reality, from impossible or self-contradictory beings (such as chimeras and imaginary space) as ‘negations’, or beings of reason which, though they help us explain impossibility and negation as such, are entirely fabricated. See Suárez, *Disputatio Metaphysica* 54, §4, 10 (Suárez 1995, 97).

⁷ With the notion of an ‘*I*-type idea’ I intend the word *idea* quite generically, granting the immensely rich and varied connotations of the term *idea* as espoused by, or applied to, the three philosophers I am discussing. I am trying to illustrate a theme or general concept here, not to seriously investigate the epistemology, psychology, and philosophy of mind of each of our thinkers. This being so, some attention to technicality in the term ‘idea’ will become relevant in my discussion of Leibniz. Note that for Aquinas, the relevant term would not be *idea* but *intelligible species*, i.e. “a form in accordance with which the intellect understands” (ST Ia, q. 85, a. 2). For Spinoza, an idea (*idea*) is “a concept of the Mind that the Mind forms because it is a thinking thing” (E2d3) and whose content is a judgment or affirmation that is identical to the idea itself (2p49ff.). On Leibniz’s notion of an idea see below. Among the numerous studies in English of the theories of representation of Aquinas, Spinoza, Leibniz, the following are among the most useful and recent: Stump 2003 and Brower and Brower-Toland 2008 (for Aquinas); Della Rocca 1996 and 2003, and

that an *object* which is not capable of being represented as existing cannot be an *object of thought*.⁸ Rather, it may be the case that the *mental act* by which we form an idea of an object might not include *forming a representation of the object's existence*.⁹ *I-type* ideas, that is, owe their content to the way they are *formed*. We can illustrate this with the notion of 'privation'. An absence, pure and simple, is nothing at all—it does not exist. But a privation is a constitutive absence or lack. The idea of a privation such as an individual's blindness is the idea of a *particular* absence—in this case, the absence of sight—in a particular subject or individual.¹⁰ So, the idea has an object, namely, an absence (or absent feature) that inheres in an actual thing (which is such as to otherwise possess whatever feature is absent). The representation of a privation is therefore not the representation of absence, pure and simple. Still, a privation is a lack, and there is no way of forming the idea of a privation that could bring it about that *it*—the privation, rather than the subject that instantiates it—could be represented as existing.

The notion of an *I-type* idea can be captured more broadly by observing that merely *how* we think *adds nothing* to existence, to the furniture of reality. Consider next this passage from Francisco Suárez (1548-1617), a late-scholastic proponent of Aquinas's views and a significant influence on Spinoza and Leibniz:

[T]o be seen or to be known is not some real being added to things, nor does it formally consist in a relation of reason, but in a denomination growing out of the

Primus 2021 (for Spinoza); and Simmons 2001 and Jorgensen 2019 (for Leibniz). For a general discussion of the term 'idea' in the seventeenth-century context, see Yolton 1975 and McRae 1965.

⁸ Here modifying a sentence from Thomas Reid mentioned in Prior (1971, 118).

⁹ Geach (1957, 1) distinguishes objects conceived as *things* from what may be regarded as the *accusatives* of mental acts (which can include things which do not exist), calling the latter 'object expressions'. Geach's distinction is minimally compatible with my conception of the sort of object referred to or expressed by an *I-type* idea (although here I emphasize the way the 'accusative' of an *I-type* idea is generated from the way in which the idea is *formed*).

¹⁰ To say that a privation is an absence that is 'in' a subject invokes the notion of *inherence*, a traditional concept relied upon heavily by Aquinas, Spinoza, and Leibniz (among many other historical figures). In my explanation of Aquinas's views in particular, I will invoke inherence, or the *in*-relation, but without attempting to explain or analyze it, as is impossible in the short space of this introduction. On the *in*-relation in Aquinas and in Spinoza, respectively, see Klima 1993 and Garrett 2018.

act of seeing or of knowing, on the basis of which the intellect can construct a relation of reason, if it compares [*conferat*] one [act] with the other.¹¹

Here, Suárez identifies three crucial points stressed by Spinoza in his early writings, and which I emphasize in SR: that (a) the *act* of apprehending what exists—including the act of apprehending ‘what exists in the mind’, or the contents of our thoughts—does not contribute any being to things (does not provide reality with further “fixtures,”¹² as it were);¹³ (b) what arises from an act of apprehension (“seeing,” “knowing”) is simply an extrinsic relation (as Suárez puts it, “denomination”) of a mind to an existing thing;¹⁴ (c) relations among things are perceived when the mind compares acts of apprehension, as when (to use Spinoza’s example), I derive a conception of *time*, as a measure of duration, by comparing my apprehension of the specific motion of one body with my apprehension of the specific motion of another.¹⁵ *Time qua* measure is not something found in what exists, but rather arises from the way I relate my various acts of apprehending what exists. The (*I*-type) idea of a relation thus arises through the comparison of mental acts. Such comparison in no way augments the inventory of existing *things*, just as any mental act cannot be regarded as producing any being beyond what can be ascribed to a mere orienting of the mind toward its subject matter. For Aquinas and Spinoza, the mental act of forming

¹¹ *Disputatio Metaphysica* 6, §6, 10; quoted in Shields 2012, 66. On the notion of a ‘relation of reason’ see *Disputatio Metaphysica* 54, §6, 1: “a relation of reason can be generally defined in a positive manner as a relation which the intellect fashions like a form ordered to something else, or a form relating one thing, which in fact is not ordered to related, to some other thing” (Suárez 1995, 116-17). Suárez is not saying here that the posed relation is strictly fictitious, but rather that the ‘order’ posited by the relation is *produced by the mind*. In the passage above Suárez says that a necessary condition of forming relations of reason is that there be a comparison between our *own* acts of apprehension; more fundamental than what features of reality we compare is the fact that we are comparing our own apprehension of those features (on some individual basis).

¹² A whimsical aside: perhaps what mental acts produce can be thought of, not as *fixtures*, but as *fixings*, in both the American and British senses of the term, namely as (respectively) extra items that embellish or complement something (as many of our thoughts do, and, as we shall see, relations and privations do in some sense), or items (like nails and screws) which serve to fix things such as furniture together (which also represents the function of relations and privations).

¹³ See CMI 5 | G I/245/1-16.

¹⁴ See CMI 1 | G I/233/30-35.

¹⁵ See CMI 4 | G I/244/24-32.

the representation of a relation or a privation does not bring about, and thus does generate a representation of, the existence of the relation or the privation.¹⁶

Yet another way to flesh out the notion of an *I*-type idea is to note how for all three of our thinkers, to exist is to enjoy a basic sort of *independence*.¹⁷ But nothing about the formation of representations of relations and privations causes us to represent *their* independence. (And likewise, Leibniz might be thought to maintain, nothing about the way we could form the idea of unconscious perception causes us to have such an idea independently of our having the idea of *conscious* perception.) To form a representation of a relation or a privation, in particular, is to form the representation of something that is irremediably *dependent on* something independent (or on more than one such thing).¹⁸ Relations and privations, more precisely, are counterfactually

¹⁶ As I mention below, for Spinoza mental acts are modes of thought; insofar as they are conceived as such, they possess the same ontological status as existing physical beings (they are “contained” in God’s attributes). But the strictly *representational* correlate of a thought (or the representational output of an idea) contributes no *additional* being to its (or its object’s) reality. For Spinoza, ideas are essentially “volitions,” namely, affirmations (or negations) (E2p49ff.), as well as causes (e.g., E2p7s), and so Spinoza would, I think, be amenable to speaking about the “representational output” of mental acts. Although such mental acts or ideas are themselves modes that inhere in the mind (and in substance), the *content* “affirmed” by these ideas is, minimally, merely “comprehended in God’s attributes” and only “exists” otherwise insofar as it is given duration by virtue of *being thought* (cf. E2p8ff.). In E2p5d, Spinoza further states that “God can form the idea of his own essence, and of all the things that follow necessarily from it, solely from the fact that God is a thinking thing, and *not* from the fact that he is the *object* of his own idea” (G II/88/25-28; my emphases). We may take away from this statement the point that a representation does not need in anyway to *furnish* the objects that it represents, i.e., to manipulate or be responsible for the structure of reality in any way that would go beyond its capacity *merely* to represent it. Della Rocca (1996, ch. 3) offers an account of this as a general feature of Spinoza’s theory of representation.

¹⁷ That is to say, what exists (primarily, or exclusively) is that which is properly independent, namely, ‘substance’. Thus Aquinas: “it is proper to an individual substance to exist by itself” (QDP 9.1c [Aquinas 1952]); Spinoza: “A substance cannot be produced by anything else (by E1p6c); therefore it will be the cause of itself, i.e. (by E1d1), its essence necessarily involves existence, *or* it pertains to its nature of exist” (E1p7). Leibniz: “we must say that there is nothing in things but simple substances, and in them, perception and appetite” (letter to de Volder, June 30, 1704, AG 181), and it is “necessary that these simple substances exist everywhere and that they be self-sufficient (with respect to one another)” (letter to de Volder 1704/5, AG 181).

¹⁸ In his recent book, *The Parmenidean Ascent*, Michael Della Rocca (2020, 189) argues that the view that “things or facts of various kinds are fundamentally loose and separate ... makes whatever relation these things or facts happen to enjoy arbitrary and ungrounded.” Another way Della Rocca could describe how the arbitrariness of relations or of relatedness results from such espousal of ‘discreteness’ would be to say that the view treats relations themselves as “loose and separate” things, implying problematically that the connection relations establish between and among other discrete things is accomplished by way of superaddition. This might make for something like a match-stick ontology where the distinction between what counts as a feature of the ontological edifice (which we may imagine as a structure built out of matchsticks) and what links such features is elided (all we have is a structure built *of match sticks*, i.e., a structure which has no internally distinguishable features). A view on which relations are the products of mental acts but cannot themselves even be *represented* as existing independently (like ordinary objects) would push against the

dependent on existing (particular) objects—that is, there must be an individual in which privations inhere, or individuals whose features may be the objects of comparison—but relations and privations only shape the way the *mind's activity* is oriented toward its object(s).¹⁹ Leibniz shares this assumption at least about relations.²⁰ But regarding the sort of mental act involved in forming the idea of unconscious perception, the consideration is special: Can there be *any* mental act resembling the formation of the idea of unconscious perception, given that we cannot *consciously* represent what an *unconscious* perception is like?²¹

Such a worry might not seem unique to Leibniz, however. Concerning *I*-type ideas in general we can ask: How could it be possible to know anything about a mental act by which we represent something which we cannot represent as existing? How, indeed, could it be possible for an *I*-type idea to inform how we do represent the way things exist? My essays elucidate these two questions by shedding light on their conjunction: Is it possible to understand something positive

tendency to treat relations as discrete ‘items’. This might prevent relations from being implicated as “loose and separate” things, the ontological primacy of which Della Rocca keenly challenges (for all cases, including those of things, facts, and beliefs).

¹⁹ Another way to put this is that relations and privations are not compatible with the nonexistence of the objects in which (respectively) they inhere or they relate. But it is in virtue of the mind’s activity, not of independent facts about the subject in which a privation inheres or the relata of a relation, that determines whether a privation or a relation is an object of thought (involving such a subject or such relata).

²⁰ Leibniz thinks that “relations arise spontaneously the moment when at least two objects with their modifications or properties are thought together” (Mugnai 1992, 111). It is unclear, however, the extent to which Leibniz talks about privations in terms of the products of mental acts. Neither Spinoza nor Leibniz have as much to say about privation as Aquinas does. But all three philosophers minimally, or in some respect, follow Aristotle in treating the *notion* of privation as that of the contrary of some form of possession. (For Aristotle, this definition governs every sort of metaphysical contrariety; see *Metaphysics* I 4, 1055a33 ff, and Bogen 1992). Aquinas, Spinoza, and Leibniz, in a general vein, associate privation with limitation of *perfection*, or being, with Aquinas and Leibniz marshalling this notion specifically with respect to the topic of evil. (Spinoza, critical of the notion of ‘evil’ itself, appeals, like Descartes, to the notion of privation in discussions of knowledge, defining *falsity* as the privation “that inadequate knowledge of things, or inadequate and confused ideas, involve[s]” [E2p35d]). Although all three of our thinkers teach us about the meaning of having an idea of that which cannot be represented as existing, it should be emphasized that they do not all see eye-to-eye concerning the natures of privations and relations specifically. Below I flag some of the instances in which their conceptions diverge. For two accounts of Leibniz’s views of privation (specifically in the context of his discussions of the metaphysics of evil), see Antognazza 2014 and Newlands 2014. For an older treatment of Spinoza’s views on privation, see Demos 1933.

²¹ I say “*resembling* the formation”: for Leibniz, ideas are not *formed*; they are innate and permanent dispositions and are the objects of *thoughts* which we form. Leibniz firmly rejects the view that ideas are mental *acts* (‘*actions*’) (see NE 52). So the question would be better stated as whether unconscious perception is an actual idea that we can, in principle, form the thought *of*. See the discussion of Leibniz below.

about the content of an *I*-type idea *by* understanding the way such an idea may inform how we represent, or conceive of, the way things are? In what follows, I discuss how this twofold question operates in my analyses of Aquinas’s concern with whether we can have an idea of the causal role of privations; Spinoza’s attempt to articulate the ontological status and cognitive and explanatory function of relations; and the problem, highlighted by Brandom, of the questionable intelligibility of the idea of unconscious perception in Leibniz. Let us turn to the essays.

2. Aquinas on Privation

Aquinas would have recognized the notion of an *I*-type idea in the guise of what he identified as a ‘being of reason’ (*ens rationis*).²² Suárez, whom I quoted earlier, helpfully defines the notion of an *ens rationis* in his *Metaphysical Disputation 54*: “[W]hat is normally and rightly defined as a being of reason is *that which has being only objectively in the intellect* or is *that which is thought by reason as being* [ut ens], *even though it has no entity in itself* [in se entitatem non habeat].”²³

Much of the force of this definition is contained in Suárez’s phrase, ‘being objectively in the intellect’ (*esse objective in intellectu*), which helps bring out the connection between the notions of a being of reason and an *I*-type idea. For Aquinas—and standardly for scholastic and

²² Two *loci classici* of Aquinas’s conception of a ‘being of reason’ are II *Sent* 34, 1, 1 and *In Meta* 5, 9, n.896; see Klima 1993, 26. The concept of a ‘being of reason’ is philosophically and historically rich and has been fairly neglected as a topic of study by historians of western philosophy. Those who do pay attention to it often treat it as denoting a representation that is ‘merely in the mind’ (often implicitly or explicitly stressing the ‘merely’), a description generically apt for ontologically denigrated entities like universals, relations, and chimeras. I cannot explore the many historical and philosophical facets of the notion of a being of reason in this introduction, but I do aim to put it and some of its rich philosophical implications on center stage. Aside from Aquinas, Suárez has the most richly elaborated theory of beings of reason (to which he devotes *Disputatio Metaphysica 54*), and I draw largely on Suárez to frame my discussion of this topic. For a helpful treatment of the notion of a being of reason in ‘Baroque scholasticism’ (including Suárez), see Novotný 2013.

An important question, which I do not take up here but which the reader should keep in mind as we go along, is whether the notion of a being of reason, as I document it and as it is characterized independently by thinkers like Suárez and Aquinas, is perfectly coextensive with my notion of an *I*-type idea.

²³ Italics in original; the full Latin reads: “Et ideo recte definiri soletens rationis esse illud, *quod habet esse objective tantum in intellectu, seu esse id, quod a ratione cogitatur ut ens, cum tamen in se entitatem non habeat*” (*Disputatio Metaphysica 54*, §1, 6; Suárez 2009, vol. 2, 1016; English translation in Suárez 1995, 62). For helpful discussion of this passage see Shields 2012, 64-65.

early modern philosophers—the ‘objective being’ of an idea refers to what, essentially, we now call its intentional content—what an idea is *about*. The definition I quoted from Suárez does not mention a further notion, present in both Aquinas and Suárez, that has to do with how concepts are *formed*.²⁴ This aspect of a concept embodies the *basis for* a concept’s having a certain content objectively. On this (scholastic) picture, concepts are formed in such a way as to “terminate” in a given representation or objective content. In the case of representations of privation, as we will see, summing or conglomerating actual states of affairs, while applying background knowledge about essences and natural kinds, may *lead us* to represent that a particular subject is lacking a certain feature which it should have. In short, the ‘objective’ aspect of a concept concerns *that*

²⁴ The distinction I am characterizing between the objective being of a concept and the *way* in which (or that by which) the concept is formed (what Suárez terms the ‘objective concept’ and the ‘formal concept’, respectively; see the quote in the next note) should not be directly conflated with the distinction, familiar to most of us from Descartes, between the ‘objective being’ and ‘formal being’ of an idea. Descartes’s own definition and elucidation of the latter distinction shed light on its difference from the distinction between the objective being and what we might call the *formative* element of ‘ideas’ (more properly, for Suárez, ‘concepts’ and for Aquinas ‘concepts’ or ‘intelligible species’). In a famous passage from his Replies to the First Set of Objections to the *Meditations*, Descartes sets forth his conception of the distinction between the objective and the formal being of ideas as follows: “‘Objective being’ in the intellect will not here mean ‘the determination of an act of the intellect by means of an object’, but will signify the object’s being in the intellect in the way in which its objects are normally there. By this I mean that the idea of the sun is the sun itself existing in the intellect—not of course formally existing, as it does in the heavens, but objectively existing, i.e. in the way in which objects normally are in the intellect.” Descartes immediately goes on to insist that the basis for his characterization of the distinction is his concern with the cause of the objective being of an idea, not insofar as it is the product of the mind’s *operations*, but insofar as the “intricacy” of an idea is concerned (Descartes 1984, 75). He thus compares the complexity of a machine—the intricacy of the design of a machine insofar as it exists extramentally—and the objective complexity of our idea of the machine, saying that the structural intricacy possessed by the former must be the ‘cause’ of whatever degree of intricacy our representation or idea of the machine possesses. What *causes* the content of our idea or representation to have the content that it does is not some mental act that contributes to our understanding of the machine but is somehow a consequence of the *relation* between the content of our idea and the structure of the machine itself, which contributes to that (imperfectly resembling) content.

On the other hand, what I am calling ‘I-type ideas’ and am likening generically to beings of reason are best viewed as ideas *of* the output of structured mental activity (summing and incorporating actual states of affairs, in Aquinas’s account of privations, and comparing observable features of distinguishable objects so as to represent them *as* distinct, in Spinoza’s account of relations) whose content thus invariably relies on the *operations* of the mind. A major theme here is that, *pace* Descartes, such operations—through their “terminating in” or giving rise to ideas of things, like privations and relations, which cannot be represented as existing—*inform* our understanding of extramental reality by contributing to our *conception* of its structure without depending for their content on an existing relation between the structure of extramental objects and the mind’s representations. For three helpful studies of Descartes’s views on objective and formal being particularly in relation to Aquinas’s and other scholastics’ theories of representation, see Brown 2007, Hoffman 2009, and Normore 1986.

which the concept represents, whereas the way a concept is formed concerns *that by which*—i.e., the mental activity through which—the concept represents what it does.²⁵

Spinoza and Leibniz follow Aquinas (and other medieval philosophers) in recognizing the basis of beings of reason in how certain ideas are formed.²⁶ In regard to Aquinas, Suárez’s definition of a ‘being of reason’ captures the essence of an ‘I-type idea’ in the following way. We may grant, for example, that Homer would exist, but not with sight, whether there were any minds to perceive this. Without a mind, however, nothing could *bring* the state of affairs described by the statement *Homer is not sighted* to entail the state of affairs described by the statement *Homer is unsighted*. Homer is not sighted, but, *qua* human—as opposed to *qua* rock or *qua* mole—he *should* be. So when the mind ‘incorporates’ the representation *Homer is (qua human)*, with *Homer is not sighted*, we form the further, summed or incorporated representation of Homer as—by virtue of his humanity—*lacking* sight or as *unsighted* (as opposed to merely *not sighted*).²⁷ This

²⁵ See Aquinas, ST Ia q. 85, a. 2c (Aquinas 1948, 1: 434): “[T]he likeness of the thing understood, that is, the intelligible species [sc. the ‘objective content’, in Suárez’s terminology], is the form by which [*quam*] the intellect understands. But since the intellect reflects upon itself, by such reflection it understands both its own act of intelligence, and the species by which [*qua*] it understands.” And Suárez, *Disputatio Metaphysica* 2, §1, 1: “That thing or nature which properly and immediately is known or represented through the formal concept [*conceptum formalem*] is called ‘objective concept’ [*Conceptus obiectivus*]. For example, when we conceive of a human, that act [*actus*] which we effect in the mind in order to conceive of the human is called ‘formal concept’. But the human known and represented by that act is called ‘objective concept’, conceived indeed through extrinsic demoniation by the formal concept (through which [*per quem*] its object is said to be conceived) and therefore rightly called ‘objective’. For the concept is not conceived as a form intrinsically terminating [*intrinsece terminans*], but as the object and matter [*obiectum et materia*] to which [*circa quam*] the formal concept is directed and to which [*ad quam*] the formal concept is directed [*versatur*] and to which the eye of the mind directly extends [*directe tendit*]...” (trans. Sydney Penner, < <http://www.sydneypenner.ca/translations.shtml#dm> >.)

²⁶ *Modulo* Leibniz’s view that thoughts, not ideas, are formed.

²⁷ Cajetan, in his commentary on Aquinas’s *On Being and Essence*, illuminatingly describes ideas of privations as formed from a process or operation of summation of (actually indifferent) states of affairs by incorporation of these states of affairs into a proposition formed by the mind (where the absence of a feature in actuality is rendered a predicate term of a proposition and attached to a subject term denoting an actually existing being). For illustrative and historical purposes, it is worth quoting the relevant passage in full: “Although Socrates may be blind without any intellect considering this, and does not become more or less blind because an intellect does consider it, yet blindness has no being (*esse*) in Socrates when an intellect does not consider it; for both of these propositions are true at the same time. This is explained thus. For Socrates to be blind as such is not for Socrates to have any substantial being (*esse*), as is clear, nor accidental, because Socrates is blind by the sole absence of visual power, and this adds nothing to Socrates; whence blindness adds no being (*esse*) whatever to Socrates. Thus, because the power of vision is lacking in Socrates without the consideration of any intellect, Socrates must be blind without any intellect considering it. A question arises here because one does not correctly see that to be blind is not to be something, but to lack the power

summation or incorporation, a structured mental activity, brings about the *I*-type idea of a particular privation in Homer, *blindness*. Reason ascribes ‘being’ to this representation as the output of the relevant type of structured mental activity, giving us a *being of reason*.²⁸ A being of reason, such as the representation of privation, is, as Suarez’s definition states, “thought by reason as being [*ut ens*],” even though the privation—e.g., the representation of a lack of sight in an individual—is not itself an “entity” (*entitas*). In this way, the notion of a being of reason corresponds to the notion of an *I*-type idea—the idea of something which cannot be represent as existing, where the representation of *nonexistence* arises from the way in which the idea is formed.

A telling passage from Aquinas’s *De veritate* profoundly elicits this comparison.²⁹ In it, Aquinas considers and rejects the view that ‘non-existence’ can *cause* the intellect to form negative propositions—propositions *about* the nonexistence of certain things—whose representational content, by virtue of being formed in this way, is veridical, i.e., true *of* what is ‘non-existing’. He writes:

Non-existing is not the cause of the truth of negative propositions in the sense that it causes them to exist in the intellect [*in intellectu*]. The soul itself does this by conforming [*conformans*] itself to a nonbeing outside the soul [*extra animam*]. Hence, this non-existing outside the soul is not the efficient cause of truth in the soul, but, as it were, its exemplary cause [... *non est causa efficiens veritatis in anima, sed quasi exemplaris*]. The difficulty is based upon the efficient cause.³⁰

of vision. For example, a ship is without a pilot, and no intellect considers this. The absence of the pilot does not give the ship any substantial or accidental being (*esse*), whence for the ship to be without a pilot is not to be something outside the soul, but not to be piloted. For privations and negations acquire being (*esse*) and become beings because the intellect, conceiving (*intelligens*) privations through positive properties (*habitus*) and negations through affirmations, in some way forms in itself some sort of image of the thing lacking. For example, when the intellect forms in itself a kind of image of a ship without a pilot, which is this mental proposition, the ship is without a pilot, the non-presence of the pilot, which is nothing outside the soul, becomes a being in the soul because the intellect makes it the term of a proposition; and since this being (*esse*) is in the soul and it has no other being (*esse*), the result is that negations and privations of this kind are not beings except in the soul objectively. Thus their being (*esse*) is nothing else than to be thought of (*intelligi*), the only manner in which all beings of reason have being (*esse*)” (Cajetan 1964, 64–65; quoted and discussed in Klima 1993, 29).

²⁸ See Suárez, *Disputatio Metaphysica* 54, §1, 16.

²⁹ I analyze this passage at length in CR, pp. 312–15.

³⁰ QDV 1.8; CR, p. 312.

The main reason that Aquinas denies the possibility, mentioned in first sentence of the passage, about the causality of nonexistence on the mind is that, for him—and plausibly—what does not exist cannot have causal properties. His alternative to this view is suggested in the two sentences that follow: “The soul itself does this [i.e., causes negative propositions to exist in the intellect] by conforming itself to a nonbeing outside the soul. Hence, this non-existing outside the soul is not the efficient cause of truth in the soul, but, as it were, its exemplary cause.” These statements pertain to the question of how we can have ideas of privations given the “nonbeing” of privations and given the fact that ideas of privations—the ideas of nonbeings—cannot be efficiently caused to exist in the mind. The answer turns on the very nature of an *I*-type idea.

To understand how, consider the notion of “conformity” that Aquinas appeals to in this passage in saying that the intellect causes negative propositions to exist in the intellect by conforming itself to a nonbeing outside the soul. Such “conformity,” Aquinas thinks, exists between a “negative proposition” about a privation (such as blindness) inhering in an actual subject, and the object to which it applies, namely (what it represents as) the actual absence of sight in that subject. Such an inhering lack would be what Aquinas calls “a nonbeing outside the soul.” We can grasp Aquinas’s notion here through the following intuitive example.

In basic photography, negative versions of an image will allow us to produce positive prints of that image. But the negative versions wouldn’t allow us to do this if they were not structural inversions of the positive prints produced from them. (In CR, pp. 313-14, I use the notion of ‘negative space’ in drawing to illustrate this point.) We might think of Aquinas’s notion of “nonbeing outside the soul” as referring to the complementary, “negative version” of an object in actuality, the latter corresponding to the “positive print” in our example. This “nonbeing outside the soul,” or the “negative version” of an actual object, is what presents the mind with an “exemplar”

of the actual object by (inversely) delineating its form. Just so, we may say that the thought of Homer's blindness, like the negative version of a photographic print, delineates the positive form of Homer insofar as it is actually the case that Homer does not exist with sight. To slightly adapt Gyula Klima's apt formulation: for Homer's blindness (to be represented) 'to be', is for Homer's sight (in actuality) 'not to be'.³¹

In forming the idea of a particular individual's blindness, what the mind represents as "outside" it—i.e., what it represents as inhering the individual—is something that is absent or does not exist—a nonbeing. This absence, or nonbeing, exists "outside the soul" insofar as it constitutes the negative correlate of a feature which an existing being has in actuality, and in this sense the absence "informs" the existing being. But precisely insofar as the relevant absence is definitively the negative correlate of an aspect of a thing's actual form, the absence cannot be represented *as* an actual being. Aquinas's odd phrase, "nonbeing outside the soul," is thus uniquely elucidated by the notion of a privation as an *I*-type idea.

A key take-away message from the *De veritate* passage above—and from CR—is, then, that for Aquinas it can be a relation of conformity through constitutive contrast, rather than strictly a relation of efficient-causal influence, that accounts for how thought latches onto actuality. The notion of an *I*-type idea, specifically, the idea of privation, provides us with insight into the character of thought's relation to actuality, into how things stand between these two. Indeed, the notion of an *I*-type idea reveals *what stands between* thought and actuality, viz. *nonexistence* insofar as it inheres in something actual, but corresponding to which there would be no *truth* were it not for the mind's activity in representing that which cannot be represented *as* existing. This unique explanatory role of *I*-type ideas exhibits their peculiar nature. Here we have one

³¹ See Klima 1993, 30.

demonstration that it is possible to understand something positive about the content of an *I*-type idea by understanding how such an idea informs the way we represent how things are.

My central line of argument in CR—which subsumes the foregoing reflections—provides additional proof of this result. I argue that Aquinas thinks that we can understand something substantive about the nature of privation by examining the role that privations play in determining how and under what conditions causal agents can produce certain effects. Homer’s blindness, for example, delimits the kinds of actions he can perform and the causal relations he can enter into. But Homer’s blindness, as a lack or absence, is not the sort of thing that can bring it about that Homer *does* perform any of these actions or enters into any of these causal relations. Because it does not follow from Homer's *blindness* that he performs certain actions and enters into certain causal relations, it cannot be on account of his blindness that Homer affects things other than Homer.

Importantly, these are all truths about blindness in Homer that we can *know*. We *know*, for example, that the statement ‘Homer stumbled because he is blind’ is false—to the extent that Homer’s blindness prevents him from counting as the efficient cause of effects either in himself or in others—*because* we can form an *idea of* a privation—*blindness* in this case. Homer not existing with sight—in actuality—is a condition of its being true that he has limited efficient-causal capacities, but what accounts for its *being a truth* that his causal powers are limited in this way is something that can be established only by synthesizing the state of affairs of Homer (*qua* human) existing, on the one hand, with the state of affairs of Homer not existing with sight, on the other. This synthesis is reflected (partly) in the understanding *that his* status as an efficient cause is thereby limited—in our grasp *that* the relevant limitation applies *to Homer*, the human being.³²

³² See ST I, q. 87, a. 3c; QDV 2, 2 ad 2; 10, 9 c; and QDV 1, 9, c.

And this understanding is based on the *formation* of the (*I*-type) idea of *Homer's blindness*—of *Homer's* lacking sight.

Thus, according to Aquinas, that Homer is blind can be importantly true. We can use this knowledge to draw conclusions about Homer and about the way Homer can or cannot enter into causal relations. The proposition that Homer is blind may also ground other predications of Homer (true or false), such as that Homer stumbled because he is blind. Yet, however we apply the *I*-type idea of the privation referred to as *Homer's blindness*, we will have failed to assert or represent a truth about the existence of the privation, recognized simply as a lack. As Aquinas's analysis of the causal role of privation reveals, then, the relation of privation to truth and inference is consistent with the status of ideas of privation as *I*-type ideas. In this way as well, the argument of CR provides an answer to the twofold question with which we began.

In the next section, we observe variations in how Spinoza and Aquinas view beings of reason as ideas of the ways in which certain representations are formed as well as the output of those ideas; how privations (for Aquinas) and relations (for the early Spinoza) fill out the profile of an *I*-type idea, or *ens rationis*, in distinctive ways; and another means—Spinoza's—of putting *I*-type ideas to epistemic use, and the epistemic limitations that attend this use.

3. Spinoza on Relations

SR explores various aspects of Spinoza's early views about relations. It centers on two early texts: the *Short Treatise on God, Man, and His Well-Being* (henceforth, "KV") which Spinoza began composing c. 1660; and the *Metaphysical Thoughts* (henceforth, "CM"), an appendix to Spinoza's *Principles of Descartes's Philosophy*, a commentary, published in 1663, on Descartes's own *Principles of Philosophy* of 1644. In this section I consider how, for Spinoza in these early works, relations are *I*-type ideas. In the first subsection, I elucidate Spinoza's conception of ideas of

relations as *entia rationis* by juxtaposing it with Aquinas's views on ideas of privations. In the second, I touch on the issue, broached in SR, of whether for Spinoza *all* ideas of relations are *I*-type ideas.

3.1. Spinoza and Aquinas: Relations vs. Privations

Spinoza explicitly conceives of relations under the guise of *entia rationis*. He writes in KV I 10:

Some things [*dingen*] are in our intellect and not in Nature [*in ons verstand ... niet in de Natuur*], so that these are only our own work, and they help us to understand things distinctly [*onderscheidelijk ... verstaan*]. Among these we include all relations [*betrekkingen*], which have reference to different things. These we call *beings of reason* [*Entia Rationis*].³³

Following Aquinas (and Suárez), Spinoza considers negations, privations, and relations to comprise the essential list of representational contents (along with mental acts that produce them) the ideas of which we refer to as beings of reason.³⁴ Hence, both Spinoza and Aquinas view privations and relations within the framework of *entia rationis*. In this framework, a first, elementary point about the difference between ideas of relations and ideas of privations concerns the structure of the operations which forming them involves. Recall that for Aquinas ideas of privations are the output of structured mental acts by which we incorporate the representation of a particular individual, as a member of a given natural kind (say, 'humanity'), with the representation of the absence of a feature in that individual which it duly possesses *as* a member of that kind. In this context, a being of reason is formed through the *incorporation* or *summation* of certain representations. By contrast, for Spinoza, as we glean from the KV passage quoted above, to form the idea of a relation involves *distinguishing*, or viewing respectively (*onderscheidelijk*), the

³³ KV I 10 | G I/49/5-8.

³⁴ See G I/234/25–28; I/245/1; I/234/27; SR 180.

observable features of objects (*dingen*) in empirical reality so as to *understand* (*verstaan*) or (as he writes in CM) to be able to “retain, explain, and imagine”³⁵ those objects *as distinct*.

Representations of relations and of privations, on Spinoza’s and Aquinas’s respective views of them as *entia rationis*, also differ in how they relate to the actual, or real, objects upon which they depend. A privation, as an absence of due *form*, inheres in the intrinsic nature of a given object. This enables a privation such as *blindness*—the idea of which denotes the lack of sight in something that is supposed to see—to be predicated of Homer on account of his membership in the class of human beings, a class of beings whose nature includes the normative ability to see. It is ultimately due to Homer’s particular instantiation of the essence (or substantial form) of ‘humanity’ that the proposition that Homer is blind can be both referential and true.

Concerning ideas of relations and beings of reason generally, Spinoza takes a contrary view. For him, beings of reason and, more specifically, representations of relations have no tie to necessary or possible conditions which would invariably make them true.³⁶ In CM, Spinoza

³⁵ CM I 1 | G I/233/32.

³⁶ “So it is evident that these modes of thinking [i.e., beings of reason] are not ideas of things [*rerum*], and can not in any way be classed as ideas [*ideas*]. So they have no object that exists necessarily, or can exist [*ideatum, quod necessariò existit, autexistere potest*]. Moreover, the reason why these modes of thinking are taken for ideas of things is that they arise from the ideas of real beings so immediately that they are quite easily confused by them by those who do not pay very close attention” (CM I 1 | G I/234/28-I/235/3). In part of this passage Spinoza puzzlingly suggests that beings of reason are not ideas *at all* (they “can not in any way be classed as ideas”). Such a contention would banish beings of reason entirely from Spinoza’s mature ontology, insofar as beings of reason are considered modes of thought. For Spinoza says in E2a3 that: “There are no modes of thinking, such as love, desire, or whatever is designated by the word affects of the mind, unless there is in the same Individual the idea of the thing loved, desired, etc. But there can be an idea, even though there is no other mode of thinking.” Here Spinoza implies at least that *every* mode of thought is (or minimally presupposes) an idea. Further, in E1p8s2, Spinoza says that “we can have true ideas of modifications which do not exist” insofar as these modifications can be conceived through modifications that do exist. How can a being of reason not be an idea if it is a mode of thought? The apparent conflict here can be resolved if we simply take Spinoza to be committed, not to the view that beings of reason cannot be classed as ideas, full stop, but that they cannot be classed as ideas of *things which exist possibly or necessarily*. And this view is borne out by the rest of the passage from CM.

It is also worth noting that unlike Aquinas, for whom ideas of privation are forged by the intellect, Spinoza takes privations (he mentions blindness) to be formed by the imagination (CM I 1 | G I/234/25-27). In the passage from KV I 10 quoted above, by contrast, Spinoza seems to speak of beings of reason generally as products of the intellect. In CM, Spinoza describes beings of reason as *aids* to the imagination (G I/233/32). See SR 186.

illustrates this by observing that “love cannot be called true or false, but [only] good or bad.”³⁷ *Love* is a relation, and it cannot be “true or false” for a variety of reasons.³⁸ One reason could be seen to stem from this relation’s formal features. *Love* is a non-symmetric relation: it is logically possible for it to be true that *Sally loves Bill* yet at the same time be false that *Bill loves Sally*. Replacing ‘Sally’ with ‘Bill’ in the statement ‘*x loves y*’ changes the statement’s truth value. It follows that no statement made about things standing in the *love* relation will be true about those things by virtue merely of their standing in that relation. The idea of *love* thus diverges from the notion of *blindness*, insofar as Homer’s actually or possibly not existing with sight *would* verify the idea that Homer is (or could be) *blind*.³⁹ More characteristic of Spinoza’s discussion of relations in the CM and KV is the contention that anything we would call a “truth” about *loving* will ultimately be based on what we desire, i.e., with what we judge—altogether independently of what is possible or necessary—to be “good” (when it is present) or “bad” (when it is absent).⁴⁰ It follows that whether there is a given instance of *love* will depend on whether we judge it to be present in a particular circumstance.

³⁷ CM I 1 | G I/235/18-19.

³⁸ Interestingly, in the *Ethics* Spinoza *defines* love as part of his list of definitions of the affects, thus indicating that ‘love’ is an object which has an essence and that we can make adequate and inadequate judgments about it. See G II/192/20-193/5.

³⁹ In this light we can compare the notion of *love* with another non-symmetric—in this case, asymmetric—relation, *being to the north of*: if Boston is to the north of New York, then New York is to the south of Boston. Here, the relation between Boston and New York expresses a *logical* necessity, not a metaphysical one. Insofar as they help us “retain, explain, and imagine ... things we have understood,” logically necessary relations might count as beings of reason. This leads to the question whether, for Spinoza, there can be *relational truths*. Perhaps a logically necessary relation can express a truth even if its relata are not objects of ideas that, by virtue of the relation (or in themselves) “exist necessarily, or can exist. Cf. KV I 1 | G I/15/10, where Spinoza seems to suggest that necessary *internal* relations *constitute* the essence of a thing which necessarily or possibly exists. He writes: “Whatever we clearly and distinctly understand to belong to the nature of a thing, we can truly affirm of that thing,” clarifying: “Understand the definite nature, by which the thing is what it is, and which cannot in any way be taken from it without destroying it, as it belongs to the essence of a mountain to have a valley, or the essence of a mountain *is* that it has a valley [my emphasis]. This is truly eternal and immutable, and must always be in the concept of a mountain, even if it does not exist, and never did” (note a).

⁴⁰ See, e.g., CM I 6 | G I/247/23-28.

Considering the idea of a relation like *love* thus illustrates the difference in Aquinas's and Spinoza's thinking concerning the ability of privations and relations, as beings of reason, to ground true statements about actually (or possibly) existing objects. A closely related issue concerns the ontological status of such relations and of beings of reason in general. Here the two philosophers differ as well. Aquinas maintains that *entia rationis* like privations, understood as beings in a 'secondary' sense, have a kind of reduced or soft being in comparison with actually existing beings, beings understood in a 'primary' sense.⁴¹ By contrast, Spinoza regards representations of relations, insofar as the mind *thinks* them, to be particular existing things, finite 'modes of thought' that are just as real, and have the same ontological status, as any other type of mode or particular thing—for example a physical body or mode of extension.⁴² Construed as modes of thought, then, representations of relations are in no way ontologically deficient in relation to other modes.

Thus, although Aquinas and Spinoza respectively regard ideas of privation and ideas of relation as beings of reason or *I*-type ideas, their conceptions of how these ideas fall under the latter category richly diverge. Yet for both philosophers—as I bring out independently in CR and in SR—the representational characteristics of beings of reason fulfill a unified epistemic function: they reveal to us how the world is structured or ordered *by us*. In this regard, an important question affects both their accounts: Does the irreducibly subjective character of beings of reason or *I*-type ideas undermine their explanatory potential?

Above, I illustrated how for Aquinas ideas of privation can serve as “exemplars” of the structure of actually existing beings, giving these ideas a unique role to play in grasping that

⁴¹ See DEE 1.4-13; CR 309; Klima 1993, 36.

⁴² In CM, Spinoza implicitly criticizes Aquinas and scholastic philosophers generally for their espousal of a distinction between 'being' and 'non-being', in which latter category they place beings of reason. He writes: “Being is badly divided into being and being of reason. ... [T]he division of being into real being and being of reason [is improper]. For they [scholastic philosophers] divide being into being and nonbeing, or into being and mode of thinking” (CM I 1 | G I/235/3-6). For a helpful account of Spinoza's response to Aristotelian scholasticism, specifically in the CM, see Costa 2021.

structure. Thus, for Aquinas the autonomous formation and inbred content of ideas of privation do not impugn the ‘objective’ or genuine explanatory value of these ideas.

In SR, I argue for a similar conclusion on Spinoza’s behalf. However, the result we get with ideas of relations is different: representations of the relations between things can be clearer than our representations of the *natures* of their relata, in contrast to the way in which privations (for Aquinas) help us understand those natures. The epistemological significance of relations, as Spinoza describes them in KV and CM, consists in how they allow us to situate particular existing objects, through their observable features, within a specific empirical *circumstance*.⁴³ Such empirical contextualization—which can be more or less fine-grained—gives us clarity about way the world *is* (or, perhaps, is laid out) in a different manner than does the cognition of essences.⁴⁴ The *clarity* that ideas of relations achieve through bringing about this circumstantial awareness is compatible with ignorance, or confusion, about the essences of the things our mind poses as related.⁴⁵ To capture this insight more formally: given the nature of relations as beings of reason, we cannot make the inference from the fact that *S* conceives that Rxy to the fact that *S* conceives

⁴³ On the connection of relations to circumstances, see TIE 101. In SR, I illustrate this point with the example of the relation defined by the concepts of *laying an egg* and *an egg hatching*. According to Spinoza, my representation of this relation will be clearer if it is tied to the representation of a female bird parent laying an egg and the egg hatching *in a certain setting*, say in a nest in a tree in the North End of Central Park. On this picture, the more precisely a relation is imagined as holding between objects in a certain (empirical) circumstance, the more valuable and effective is its heuristic function, revealing how and to what extent features of existence may be organized and elucidated by us. According to Langton (2000), Locke presents a similar picture of the epistemic function of relations.

⁴⁴ Nevertheless, at TIE 55 Spinoza acknowledges an analogy between the way in which the essence or the existence of a thing can be related to the essence, or the existence, of another thing depending on how generally the first thing’s essence or existence is conceived. Thus, he writes: “[T]he same difference that exists between the essence of one thing and the essence of another also exists between the actuality or existence of the one thing and the actuality or existence of the other. So if we wished to conceive the existence of Adam, for example, through existence in general, it would be the same as if, to conceive his essence, we attended to the nature of being, so that in the end we defined him by saying that Adam is a being. Therefore, the more generally existence is conceived, the more confusedly also it is conceived, and the more easily it can be ascribed fictitiously to anything. Conversely, the more particularly it is conceived, then the more clearly it is understood, and the more difficult it is for us, [even] when we do not attend to the order of Nature, to ascribe it fictitiously to anything other than the thing itself” (II/20/17-II/21/1).

⁴⁵ Aquinas would accept our relative ignorance of the essences of particular things; I think he would, however, deny that the *clarity* of representations of relations is compatible with such ignorance.

of x or of y (and vice versa), where to conceive of x or of y means to conceive of them through their essences.

3.2. *The Univocality of Spinoza's Account of Relations*

Two important issues discussed but left open in SR pertain to the theme of relations as I -type ideas in Spinoza. One issue concerns whether relations are all of a kind for Spinoza—i.e., are all relations I -type ideas? Another consideration has to do with the distinction between relations and universals. One of the chief aims of SR could be stated as the goal of figuring out whether, for Spinoza, universals function as I -type ideas in the way that relations appear to. In what follows, I focus on the univocality of his thought about relations.

In the early works, as we have seen, Spinoza talks explicitly about how we may understand things better by comparing their observable features without nevertheless grasping their natures. Such comparison yields ideas of relations between, for instance, the good and evil traits of things, or between the certain and determinate motions of distinct bodies.⁴⁶ In the *Ethics*, however, Spinoza appeals fundamentally to relations, chiefly *being conceived through*, *being caused by*, and *being 'in'*,⁴⁷ which underwrite how we grasp that, and in virtue of what, two or more things have a certain *nature* in common such that they can be understood through, or in terms of, one another.⁴⁸ Is it possible for Spinoza to combine his perspectives on these two grades of relationality?⁴⁹

⁴⁶ On “good” and “evil” as “respects” in which one evaluates the usefulness of things, see KV I 10 | G I/49/10-20. On “what we call time” as the result of determining the duration of a thing in comparison with “the duration of other things which have a certain and determinate motion,” see CM I 4 | G I/244/24-32.

⁴⁷ There is a vast literature studying the nature of and connection among these relations. See, e.g., Della Rocca 2008, Laerke 2011, Morrison 2013, Melamed 2013, Newlands 2010.

⁴⁸ This is at least a fundamental way in which Spinoza puts these relations to use. E1a1 distinguishes the natures of substance and modes by stipulating that “Whatever is, is either in itself or in another”; E1a5 appeals to the *conceived through* relation to indicate that things with different natures cannot be “understood” (*intelligi*) through one another. E1p2 and E1p3 between them appeal to the *in*-relation, the *conceived-through* relation, and the *caused-by* relation to establish the sufficient conditions under which two things have “nothing in common.”

⁴⁹ This is not quite the same as the question whether the *ideas* of causation, conception, and inherence or being-in are I -type ideas. But exploring the compatibility of Spinoza's early views about relations as *entia rationis* and his later employment of relations in the *Ethics*, particularly concerning the respective epistemic roles of these types of relations

I think that it is. My belief is inspired by *Ethics* Part 1, Proposition 4 and its demonstration. The proposition reads: “Two or more things are distinguished from one another, either by a difference in the attributes of the substances or by a difference in their affections [i.e., modes].” Spinoza concludes in the demonstration that “there is nothing outside the intellect [*extra intellectum*] through which a number of things can be distinguished from one another except substances, or [*sive*] what is the same (by 1d4), their attributes, and their affections.”⁵⁰

A peculiar feature of E1p4d is its twofold reference to what lies “outside the intellect” (*extra intellectum*). Spinoza uses this phrase in the above-quoted conclusion to this demonstration. He also uses it in the demonstration’s only premise: “Whatever is, is either in itself or in another (by E1a1), that is (by E1d3 and E1d5), outside the intellect there is nothing except substances and their affections.” Here, Spinoza is relying on Axiom 1 of Part 1—“Whatever is, is either in itself or in another”—along with the definition of ‘substance’ (E1d3) as (in part) “what is in itself” and the definition of ‘mode’ (E1d5) as (in part) “what is in another,”⁵¹ to infer that “outside the intellect” there are only substance and modes. The next sentence of the demonstration concludes that substances (and—we are now told—their attributes) and modes are the only basis “outside the intellect” on which “a number of things can be distinguished from one another.”

within the context of his ontology, does give us initial purchase on the former question. Making such an initial attempt to explicate this compatibility is all that I propose to do here.

⁵⁰ The passage reads in full:

E1p4: Two or more distinct things are distinguished from one another, either by a difference in the attributes of the substances or by a difference in their affections.

Dem.: Whatever is, is either in itself or in another (by 1a1), i.e. (by 1d3 and 1d5), outside the intellect there is nothing except substances and their affections. Therefore, there is nothing outside the intellect through which a number of things can be distinguished from one another except substances, *or* what is the same (by 1d4), their attributes and their affections, q.e.d.

⁵¹ The full definitions of ‘substance’ and ‘mode’ read respectively: “By substance I understand what is in itself and is conceived through itself, i.e., that whose concept does not require the concept of another thing, from which it must be formed” (E1d3); “By mode I understand the affections of a substance, *or* that which it in another through which it is also conceived” (E1d5).

What, exactly, is the intellect doing in E1p4d?⁵² There are several reasons to think that reference to the intellect *doesn't* belong in the demonstration.⁵³ First, the intellect is not mentioned in Proposition 4 itself, so its role and significance in the demonstration are unanticipated. Second, the phrase “*extra intellectum*” is formally redundant—the demonstration of E1p4 would go through without needing to appeal to it. Finally, the phrase may also be *substantively* redundant; Spinoza speaks of modes and substances being the only basis on which distinct things can be distinguished outside the intellect, but if whatever is *in* the intellect is itself a mode,⁵⁴ then in terms of the mode/substance distinction, whether something is “inside” or “outside” the intellect is irrelevant.

Given these considerations, it is reasonable to suppose that Spinoza is implying a broader message through his use of the phrase “*extra intellectum*” in E1p4d. On my reading of Proposition 4 and its demonstration, Spinoza is, among other things, identifying the intellect as part of his ontology while making clear that it is not *that* part of the ontology that generates or dictates the fundamental distinctions that structure the ontology itself, i.e., the distinctions (and by extension, relations) between substance (and its attributes) and its affections (i.e., modes).⁵⁵ Thus, Spinoza affirms that the intellect, *qua* mode, is itself in the realm of things existing outside the intellect,⁵⁶ while denying that its representations, even though “true” (see E2p41⁵⁷), are by themselves

⁵² We might similarly ask: what is the intellect doing in Spinoza’s account of *entia rationis*? Is there evidence that Spinoza truly privileges the intellect in accounting for relations as beings of reason, and if so, why? Spinoza clearly mentions memory and imagination in this context; how does the intellect relate to these? Is the intellect more fundamental? Do imagination and memory play distinct, perhaps auxiliary roles? Do these latter play a distinct role in the formation, or the content, of beings of reason? A relevant stretch of text to consult is CM I 1 | G I/234/1-28.

⁵³ For an illuminating discussion of this issue, see Silverman 2016, sect. 5, from which the following suggestions are derived.

⁵⁴ See E2a3.

⁵⁵ On these points see Gartenberg 2020.

⁵⁶ Spinoza also affirms this in Letter 9: “... the intellect, thought infinite, pertains to *natura naturata*, not to *natura naturans*” (G IV/45/33). Cf. E1p31ff.

⁵⁷ What is true or adequate about the intellect’s representation derives precisely from its being part of the infinite intellect of God; hence what is true about the representations of the intellect is precisely that they are *modes of thought* (and hence of substance). (In this sense we might take the “truth” of the intellect’s representations to consist in their

responsible for the distinctions (and relations) obtaining among things “outside the intellect,” i.e., distinctions (and relations) between substances (and their attributes) and modes.⁵⁸

Combining this lesson about the place of the intellect and its representations in Spinoza’s ontology with Spinoza’s conception of ideas of relations as beings of reason in CM and KV yields a provocative meta-ontological view. Thinking about things in terms of their dependence on one another—in terms of how one thing is caused by another, inheres in another, or is conceived through a another—constrains in a fundamental way the options we have for thinking of those things. Viewing things as dependent on each other in this way allows us, according to Spinoza, to know that (e.g.) insofar as one thing has the essence of being a physical thing—i.e., is a mode of extension—it cannot be caused by, inhere in, or be conceived through something that has the essence of being a mental thing—i.e., a mode of thought.⁵⁹ But the conceptual regimentation of reality in terms of such dependence, Spinoza’s early views would seem to suggest, is compatible with apparent arbitrariness in empirical existence.⁶⁰ *How* we evaluate the usefulness of two objects we encounter and represent as distinct based on a comparison of their observable features, for example, does not itself determine whether both objects are physical items, or both mental items,

“authenticity” as modes of thought.) Thus, in E2p11c, Spinoza writes: “when we say that the human Mind perceives this or that, we are saying nothing but that God, not insofar as he is infinite, but insofar as he is explained through the nature of the human Mind, *or* insofar as he constitutes the essence of the human Mind, has this or that idea.” *But* this fact is compatible with the representations of the mind themselves being partial or inadequate, as Spinoza goes on to say. This happens insofar as “God has this or that idea, not only insofar as he constitutes the nature of the human Mind, but insofar as he also has the idea of another thing together with the human Mind ...” (G II/94/32-II/95/5). Here Spinoza provides a precise explanation of how the intellect’s representations—specifically insofar as it has representations that *relate* to the representations of other things—can be confused or inadequate, and hence liable to represent distinctions among things in a confused and partial manner. Crucially, the explanation is *in terms of* the intellect’s status as a mode of God.

⁵⁸ These are grounded in the *one* distinction between what is ‘in’ itself and what is ‘in’ another. Cf. Ep. 4: “Except for substances and accidents, nothing exists in reality, *or* outside the intellect [*extra intellectum*].”

⁵⁹ See, e.g., E2p6. For a classic analysis of this point, Della Rocca 1996. As Della Rocca has expressed the idea, *thinking about* thought will not tell us about how to *think about* body, and thinking about body will not tell us about how to think about thought.

⁶⁰ In the *Theological-Political Treatise*, Spinoza richly portrays how such arbitrariness in human perception and belief is manifested, specifically at a social level.

i.e., whether both are modes of the attribute of extension, or both modes of the attribute of thought.⁶¹ This brings us back to the theme, emphasized by Spinoza in his early works as well as by Aquinas and by Leibniz, that *how* we think does not in itself *produce* being or independently *procure* its structure.⁶²

Yet it is just for this reason that ideas of relations *qua* beings of reason are also epistemologically suspect—as Spinoza emphasizes in CM. Such ideas present us with the opportunity to misrepresent the mind’s proper place within Spinoza’s ontology, for we are prone to view their content as *accountable* for the structure of this ontology. In succumbing to this error, we fail to appreciate what E1p4 reveals as the ontologically relegated role of the intellect’s representations, a failure which amounts, on the view Spinoza puts forward in his early works, to confusing beings of reason with real beings. Spinoza emphatically warns us of this liability in CM:

[W]e should carefully be on guard in the investigation of things, lest we confound real beings with beings of reason. For it is one thing to inquire into the nature of things, and another to inquire into the modes by which things are perceived by us.⁶³

In explicating Spinoza’s early views on relations and beings of reason in SR, then, one of my main goals is to provide a basis for detecting continuities between features of the metaphysical perspective we find adumbrated in the early works and the more fully articulated metaphysical picture presented in the *Ethics*. In my view it is the topic of *relations* that ultimately undergirds this connection.

⁶¹ Consider the ambiguity in this respect represented by artifacts. Can *we* decide based on the causation, conception, and inherence relations whether the identity conditions of a statue, for example, are physical or mental?

⁶² As we are about to see, Leibniz makes this point in terms of the distinction between thoughts, which *we form* adventitiously and on certain occasions, and ideas, which are immutably and perennially in us and which correspond to or reflect the ideas in God’s mind.

⁶³ CM I 1 | G I/235/30-37.

Let us now turn to our remaining case study in the metaphysics of intentionality underlying *I*-type ideas—the case of Leibniz. Examining how he grapples with the idea of unconscious perception reveals limits to the notion of an *I*-type idea.

4. Leibniz on the Idea of Unconscious Perception

In Aquinas and in Spinoza, the notion of an *I*-type idea presupposes that such an idea can be formed based on some feature of actuality whose character is known to us. But can we have a representation of an object that we cannot represent as existing, as in an *I*-type idea, if we lack the wherewithal to base this idea on any reality of which we are familiar? This problem confronts Leibniz in his metaphysical account of perceptual distinctness.

Robert Brandom (1981) highlights this problem in his reconstruction of this account. BL broadly addresses two issues: (i) the role of unconscious perception in Leibniz’s larger theory of representation; and (ii) the problematic status of unconscious perception as itself an object of thought. The focal point of the essay is Margaret Wilson’s astute allegation that the particular problems surrounding (ii) are evoked by the notion of ‘inference’ that Brandom appeals to in his interpretation of (i).

Leibniz, in his late metaphysics, famously maintains that monads, or individual substances, all perceive, or express, their own bodies and the entire universe: this is true for unconscious monads (e.g., trees and micro-organisms) as much as it is for conscious monads (e.g., sentient animals and sapient, self-reflective human beings). There is an infinity of degrees of distinctness among the perceptions of monads arrayed in a hierarchy from those which are conscious to those which are not; while not all monads do so consciously, all perceive themselves and their world with some degree of distinctness. Thus, in the *Monadology*, Leibniz writes: “Monads are limited, not as to their objects, but with respect to the modifications of their knowledge of them. Monads

all go confusedly to infinity, to the whole; but they are limited and differentiated by the degrees of their distinct perceptions.”⁶⁴

Brandom analyzes this doctrine of degrees of perceptual distinctness via the idea that the more distinct a perception is, the more complex is its inferential structure, i.e., the potential of a monad’s perception to enable us (i.e., external observers) to make inferences from the internal structure of the perception to the perception’s ability to correctly discriminate properly individuated features of the monad’s (physical) environment. Perceptions that enable us to do this are correspondingly more distinct than perceptions that don’t, and this principle applies equally for monads which lack consciousness altogether. But Brandom sometimes slips into language suggesting that monads *themselves* can experience their perceptions as more or less distinct, and this seems inconsistent with the case of “bare” monads which are constitutively unconscious, themselves lacking all form of what we would recognize as ‘experience’. Wilson charges that this language renders the doctrine of degrees of distinct perception incoherent, since we cannot have any idea of what *unconscious* perception is *like* (i.e., how it might be experienced). And so, attributing representational ‘experiences’ to bare monads conflates the distinctions between confused/distinct perception and unconscious/conscious perception.⁶⁵

⁶⁴ M 60, AG 221.

⁶⁵ Wilson writes: “Leibniz’s distinction between *distinct* and *confused* perception cannot just be read as a distinction between *conscious* and *unconscious* perceptions, since it has to be applicable *within* the realm of wholly unconscious monads. For similar reason, it cannot be identified with a distinction between perceptions that do possess internal intensionality, and those which merely ‘express the many in the one’ in a way that allows external inference from the ‘perceiver’ to the ‘perceived’. For (I am supposing) bare monads do not *experience* representationally any more than they experience consciously. The question, then, is whether anything can be made of the distinction between distinct and confused perceptions that does not trade on either internal intensionality or the distinction between conscious and unconscious perceptions” (Wilson 1999, 343; BL 77).

As I point out in BL, however, Brandom is aware of a difficulty in this domain. He writes critically, concerning Leibniz’s claim in the *New Essays on Human Understanding* (1704) that we have an innate idea of perception,⁶⁶ that

we cannot say, ‘... [unconscious] perceptions are just like the ones which we are conscious of, only unconscious,’ and claim thereby to have expressed an idea (clear or distinct) as one might say, ‘unobserved elephants are just like observed ones’; for ... when mental states are at issue awareness is the only feature that matters. ... [I]t is clear that we cannot make the notion of unconscious perception distinct merely by invoking a plenum of degrees of perception intermediate between those of which we are aware and those of which we are not.⁶⁷

Brandom here expresses something akin to Wilson’s worry through the observation that we cannot have a ‘distinct’ conception of unconscious perception—‘distinct’ here being used in Leibniz’s sense as meaning a perception or thought the distinguishing features of whose content we can separately enumerate. We could not recognize a *case* of unconscious perception if we were confronted with it precisely because, Brandom suggests, this would involve recognizing the distinguishing marks of a *mental state* whose marks, *qua* mental state, are inherently unobservable.

What Brandom calls “the notion of unconscious perception” has the *form* of what I have regarded as the object of an *I*-type idea. This putative object of an *I*-type idea is *itself* an idea—what Leibniz regards as an innate, archetypal or paradigmatic representation that underlies our thinking or capacity to have thoughts about things.⁶⁸ In the cases of privations and relations, the question was how we can represent that which cannot be represented *as* existing. With the idea of unconscious perception, by contrast, we are questioning the possibility of a putatively innate representation *to be available to thought*, or to be recognizable *as present ‘in us’*, in the first place.

⁶⁶ NE 51.

⁶⁷ Brandom 1981, 459; BL 89.

⁶⁸ In “What Is an Idea?” (1678) Leibniz writes: “That the ideas of things are in us means ... nothing but that God, the creator alike of things and of the mind, has impressed a power of thinking upon the mind so that it can by its own operations derive what corresponds perfectly to the nature of things” (L 208).

Since it is not our *having* unconscious perceptions that is at issue—there is no doubt in Leibniz’s mind that we have them—but rather the intelligibility of our having the very *idea* of unconscious perception, we must examine what it means for there to be an *I*-type idea of an idea.

Once we ask whether it is possible to have an *I*-type idea of an idea, the question of the properties of ideas becomes more urgent.⁶⁹ Leibniz defines perception reductively as the representation of a multitude in a unity (from a certain point of view, namely, that of a monad or simple substance); apperception, or awareness, and unconscious perception fall respectively within the purview of this definition.⁷⁰ Under the genus of *perception* Leibniz includes *ideas* and *thoughts*. The difference between thoughts and ideas is that ideas are always ‘in us’, whether we apperceive them or not. Ideas are in turn the *objects* of thoughts; when we apperceive an idea on a certain occasion, we think *of* it.⁷¹ Whereas ideas are abiding “dispositions” or “potentialities,” thoughts are discrete or episodic *mental acts* occasioned in all cases by some stimulus, either sensory or introspective.⁷²

⁶⁹ I make this statement about the present context, of course. It would be no understatement to say that understanding the nature of ideas in general was *the* chief epistemological—and one of the chief metaphysical—preoccupations of early modern philosophers, for Spinoza no less than for Leibniz (and stemming most directly from Descartes and his followers). A large segment of Spinoza’s own theory of intentionality deals with what he calls “ideas of ideas” (see, e.g., E2p21s). Spinoza regards the mind as itself an idea (see E2p13). Primus (2021) argues convincingly that an idea of an idea should be construed as an idea of the *mind*, where the former idea is simply an aspect of the mind itself with which it is “one and the same,” and which is expressed as a kind of immediate self-awareness. If so, then the conclusion I reach below that it is impossible to have an *I*-type idea of an idea would apply literally to Spinoza’s doctrine of ideas of ideas. How to fit the notion of an *I*-type idea—and by extension that of a being of reason—within his broader epistemology and philosophy of mind is a very interesting and of course much larger issue.

⁷⁰ “The passing state which involves and represents a multitude in the unity or in the simple substance is nothing other than what one calls *perception*, which should be distinguished from apperception, or consciousness This is where the Cartesians have failed badly, since they took no account of the perceptions that we do not apperceive” (M 14, AG 214).

⁷¹ “I distinguish ideas from thoughts. For we always have all out pure or distinct ideas independently of the senses, but thoughts always correspond to some sensation” (NE 119).

⁷² “[A]n idea is an immediate inner object, and ... this object expresses the nature or qualities of things. If the idea were the *form* of the thought, it would come into and go out of existence with the actual thoughts which correspond to it, but since it is the *object* of thought it can exist before and after the thoughts. Sensible outer objects are only *mediate*, because they cannot act immediately on the soul. God is the only *immediate outer* object. One might say that the soul itself is its own immediate inner object; but that is only to the extent that it contains ideas, i.e. something corresponding to things. ... (NE 109). “This is how ideas and truths are innate in us—as inclinations, dispositions, tendencies, or natural potentialities, and not as actions” (NE 52).

According to Leibniz, we become cognizant of certain among our ideas through reflection as opposed to the prompting of an external stimulus.⁷³ These “intellectual” ideas are implicated in *any* act of perceiving, conscious or unconscious. Intellectual ideas cannot be derived from sense experience and are a necessary condition of any act of perception involving a certain kind of content. The very perception of an existence external to us, for example, presupposes the innate idea of *being*, which each individual antecedently embodies, and which may be drawn out and itself apperceived by individuals capable of conscious reflection.⁷⁴ Leibniz writes: “...intellectual ideas, or ideas of reflection, are drawn from our mind. I would like to know how we could have the idea of *being* if we did not, as beings ourselves, find being within us.”⁷⁵

Crucially, Leibniz lists *perception* among (the objects of) these *sine qua non* intellectual ideas:

[C]an it be denied that there is a great deal that is innate in our minds, since we are innate to ourselves, so to speak, and since we include Being, Unity, Substance, Duration, Change, Action, Perception, Pleasure, and hosts of other objects of our intellectual ideas? And since these objects are immediately related to our understanding and always present to it (although our distractions and needs prevent our being always aware of them), is it any wonder that we say that these ideas, along with what depends on them, are innate in us?⁷⁶

Notice the statement here that what is innate in us is not only these intellectual ideas themselves, but what “depends” on them. Leibniz is speaking of further ideas as well as truths about them that are implicit in the intellectual ideas in question. Dependent on the innate idea of *perception*—conceived here in the reductive terms we saw Leibniz give above, namely as the expression or

⁷³ “[S]ome simple ideas are perceived through reflection ... The mind must at least give itself its thoughts of reflection, since it is the mind which reflects” (NE 119).

⁷⁴ For a helpful account of Leibniz’s notion of self-reflection, see Perkins 1999.

⁷⁵ NE 85-86.

⁷⁶ NE 51-52.

representation of a multiplicity in a unity—is the further *idea* of apperception and the innately derived *truth* that not all perceptions are apperceived.

If we can represent the truth that not all perceptions are apperceived, does this mean that we have an *idea* of unconscious perception? There is some evidence that Leibniz would say that we cannot have a (distinct) idea of *wholly* unconscious perception. If true, this would show the idea of unconscious perception to resemble privations and relations in being something that cannot be represented as present in actuality—or in this case, presented to thought—and thus to be the appropriate type of object for an *I*-type idea. Let us briefly explore this possibility.

The last of Leibniz’s commitments I surveyed above concerned the dependence of the idea of apperception and the truth that some perceptions are unconscious on the innate, intellectual idea of perception in general. This understanding implies that when we reflect on the idea of perception within us, what we perceive are the *sufficient conditions* on perception, embodied in the general definition of perception Leibniz provides.⁷⁷ This indicates that we can have an idea of unconscious perception insofar as we can have the idea of what is sufficient for perception in general. But what exactly *is* the idea of unconscious perception? Leibniz clearly holds that we can have the idea of there being *such a thing* as unconscious perception. Yet it does not appear to follow that we can have an idea of an unconscious *mental state*, as Brandom points out in the passage from his essay I quoted above. Plausibly, our idea of an unconscious perceptual state is simply the idea of the *least* conscious perceptual state. Yet any state which we call the *least* conscious has a determinate degree of consciousness, and there could presumably be a state of lesser consciousness than that.

⁷⁷ Aside from the condition that perception consist in the representation of the many in the one from a given point of view, the remainder of the jointly sufficient conditions on perception are supplied by Leibniz’s notion of ‘expression’ (or representation in general). Leibniz offers multiple definitions, or characterizations, of ‘expression’, one of his most notable being from “What Is an Idea?”: “That is said to express a thing in which there are relations [*habitudines*] which correspond to the relations of the thing expressed” (L 207). For two helpful accounts of Leibniz’s notion of expression, see Kulstad 1977 and Swoyer 1995.

It would seem, then, the idea of *wholly unconscious* perception is impossible. Leibniz appears to follow this line of reasoning with his example of the idea of ‘the most rapid motion’ in “Meditations on Knowledge, Truth, and Ideas” (1684):

Suppose that a wheel turns at a most rapid rate. Then anyone can see that if a spoke of the wheel is extended beyond its rim, its extremity will move more rapidly than will a nail in the rim itself. The motion of the nail is therefore not the most rapid, contrary to hypothesis. Yet at first glance we seem to have an idea of the most rapid motion, for we understand perfectly what we are saying. But we cannot have any idea of the impossible. ...That we do not always at once have an idea of a thing of which we are conscious of thinking, the example of most rapid motion has shown.⁷⁸

As Leibniz says here, we can *think* of something of which we lack an idea. This point dovetails with the specific proposal that we can have an idea of the sufficient conditions on something’s *being* a perception, and so *think* broadly *of* perception, without having an idea of what is *necessary* for something to be an *unconscious* (as opposed to conscious) perception. The above passage thus provides *prima facie* and, albeit, limited evidence that Leibniz would agree that we cannot have the idea of a wholly unconscious perception.

In Leibnizian terms, then, insofar as the *I*-type idea *of* the idea unconscious perception would be regarded as the idea of something that cannot be represented as existing, it (the putative *I*-type idea) should be regarded instead as the *thought*—not the *idea*—of unconscious perception. Yet—and this is the crucial point—there are more general grounds for believing that there is no such thing as the *I*-type idea of the idea of unconscious perception, and indeed that there can be no such thing as an *I*-type idea of another (first-order) idea. For to have such an *I*-type idea would automatically entail that the first-order idea is something which, as the object of an *I*-type idea, could not be represented as *existing qua* something that is *in us* (i.e., ‘innate’ in Leibniz’s sense). And if an idea is not—or is not capable of being represented as—*in us*, then it cannot be referenced

⁷⁸ L 293.

at all (even as the object of an *I*-type idea). Further, an idea, for Leibniz, is a representation of something possible or actual (this is true of ideas insofar as they are in us and insofar as they exist in God's mind).⁷⁹ An *I*-type idea, then, could never represent the *content* of another idea, let alone the idea of unconscious perception. For the *I*-type idea would have to represent something that either is or can be represented as existing, as something which cannot be represent as existing. This is contradictory.⁸⁰

Leibniz's case relates in a more roundabout way to the narrative we have been unfolding concerning our authors' preoccupation with the idea of thinking about what cannot be represented as existing. For one thing, the notion of an *I*-type *idea* is somewhat foreign to Leibniz's metaphysics because whereas *I*-type ideas owe their content to how they are formed, ideas are never *formed* for Leibniz: they reside perennially in us and are the objects of conscious thoughts, which are formed. Such a stance is reflected in Leibniz's conception of beings of reason. Relations, for example, though formed by our mind insofar as we think them on any given occasion—as when we compare the observable feature of two objects—are not inherently the *product* of mental acts, as they ultimately are for Spinoza in his early works. For Leibniz, *any* relation we could conceive is *already* represented in God's mind as part of God's knowledge of the pre-existing arrangement of substances and their infinite interconnections.⁸¹

⁷⁹ NE 109.

⁸⁰ Can truths be the objects of *I*-type ideas, or must we think of truths as always derived from such objects? (Correspondingly we might ask whether truths can stand as the 'accusatives' of *I*-type ideas.) Leibniz seems to think that the latter is the case; in "What Is an Idea?" he writes: "Although ... the idea of a circle is not similar to a circle [sc. in that the former, not the latter, is a modification of the mind], truths can be derived from it which would be confirmed beyond doubt by investigating the circle" (L 208). For Leibniz, whatever truths are derivable between an idea and its object—and whatever that object may be—will exist in virtue of, and in fact will be constituted by, the expression relation that holds between them (a relation which Leibniz also describes in this same context). Recall, also, that in my discussion of Aquinas I suggested that truths (such as that it is not the case that Homer stumbled because he is blind) are things we derive from the objects of *I*-type ideas (such as the idea of Homer's blindness, i.e. that of *blindness* in Homer).

⁸¹ NE 227.

Yet we learn much about *I*-type ideas, and the limits associated with them, from the Leibnizian case. The view that ideas cannot be the objects of *I*-type ideas, as extrapolated from Leibniz's model, applies equally to Aquinas's views on privation and to Spinoza's views on relations. An underlying consequence of their pictures is that even for there to be (*de re*) thought there must be a relation of thought to actuality: the *relation* must be there even if an object is not—or cannot be—presented. But as the example of Leibniz especially brings out, an idea itself embodies characteristics that constitutively prevent it from *failing* to be represented to exist by another idea in the way permitted for anything which could stand in relation to thought but which is not itself an idea.⁸² The notion of an *I*-type idea, when applied to other ideas, appears self-defeating. And this reveals something special about the nature of ideas considered *as* objects of thought.

5. The Art of Combination

One might question the philosophical motivation for investing significance in the connection posited here among Aquinas, Spinoza, and Leibniz, whose precise grouping might otherwise seem arbitrary. The link might seem further fortuitous for being presented under the pretext of showcasing three independently conceived and topically self-contained pieces of research.

I embrace this fortuitousness—but not without principle. Allow me to explain my perspective. Suppose one is given the task of identifying what the contents of a certain bag generally have in common—a fortuitous circumstance, no doubt. In the bag is found a pen, a cigarette, and a screwdriver. What do the items in this purportedly arbitrary assortment have in common? Perhaps that all are oriented vertically in virtue of their function? Or perhaps that (let us

⁸² Or mode of thought, to put it broadly and in Spinozistic terms.

assume) they are all white? Certainly, they are all in the same bag. Where will these commonalities lead us?

If the goal were merely to detect similarity, then citing any of these features would suffice. If, however, the goal is to enable discovery and judgment about such things beyond whatever similarity relation we find to supervene directly on each item's immediately observable properties thought together with those of the others, then—as Leibniz tells us—we should be interested in how these items are implicated in a combination of ideas and truths that resolve and articulate a larger order.⁸³ It may not be obvious how a pen, a cigarette, and a screwdriver could fulfill this role. But consider: each of these items, in a richly informative and unique way, embodies or expresses the idea of *something that is habit-forming*—we're all familiar with the nicotine addict, the obsessive writer, and the inveterate Mr./Ms. Fix-It. Leibniz thinks that given a concept like *habit-forming*, or even *habit*, it is possible to discover all the predicates of the concept or all the propositions which are true of it. Given an exhaustive enumeration of these predicates and propositions, some will relate to, or express, the concept more meaningfully—i.e., more richly, consequentially, and informatively.

In this essay, I have treated Aquinas's ideas on privation and causation, Spinoza's views on relations, and Leibniz's understanding of unconscious perception as together offering a distinctly meaningful window into the concept of an *object of thought*. This involved exploring

⁸³ This is the general presumption underlying the model of conceptual thought Leibniz proposes in his 1666 treatise *On the Art of Combinations*. There he writes, for example: “Since all things which exist or can be thought of are in the main composed of parts, either real or at any rate conceptual, it is necessary that those things which differ in species differ either in that they have different parts—and here is the use of complexions—or in that they have a different situation—and here is the use of dispositions” (A VI.i 177; quoted in Rutherford 1995, 228). As Donald Rutherford explains: “It is evident that he [Leibniz] regards this theory of [the combinatorial nature of] concepts as following from more general metaphysical principles. In his view, *all* things, and thus all concepts, are defined in terms of the parts they contain (their ‘matter’) and the specific arrangement of these parts (their ‘form’). Differences in parts (when these parts are conceived as belonging to some larger whole) are differences of ‘complexion’; differences in the arrangement of parts are differences of ‘situation’ or ‘disposition’” (Rutherford 1995, 228).

whether the thought of an object which cannot be represented as existing is a notion that can help us resolve our understanding of what it is to apprehend what does exist, as well as whether our grasp of our own ideas follows analogous principles. If my cursory investigation here has demonstrated anything, I hope it is that the occasions and motivations of philosophical inquiry are not arbitrary until they are *discovered* to be so.

Titles and Abbreviations

Aquinas

DEE = *De entia et essentia*

InMeta = *In duodecim libros Metaphysicorum expositio*

QDP = *Quaestiones disputatae de potential Dei*

QDV = *Quaestiones disputatae de veritate*

Sent = *In quatuor libros Sententiarum*

ST = *Summa theologiae*

Spinoza

CM = *Cogitata Metaphysica* [*Metaphysical Thoughts*]

Ep. = *Epistolae* [Letters]

KV = *Korte Verhandeling van God de Mensch en deszelfs Welstand* [*Short Treatise on God, Man, and his Well-Being*]

TIE = *Tractatus de Intellectus Emendatione* [*Treatise on the Emendation of the Intellect*]

E = *Ethica* [*Ethics*]

Note: All citations to the Latin text of Spinoza's works are from G, and all English translations of Spinoza's writings are taken from C (both listed in the bibliography). References to the parts of Spinoza's works follow the conventions used in Yitzhak Y. Melamed, ed. *A Companion to Spinoza*. Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 2021.

Leibniz

NE = *New Essays on Human Understanding*

M = *Monadology*

Bibliography

- Antognazza, Maria Rosa. 2014. "Metaphysical Evil Revisited." In *New Essays on Leibniz's Theodicy*, edited by Samuel Newlands and Larry Jorgensen, 112-134. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Aquinas, Thomas. 1952. *On the Power of God*, translated by the English Dominican Friars. Westminster, MD: The Newman Press.
- . 1948. *Summa Theologica*, 5 vols. Translated by the Fathers of the English Dominican Province. New York: Benziger Bros.
- Bogen, James. 1992. "Change and Contrariety in Aristotle." *Phronesis*: 1-21.
- Brandt, Robert. 1981. "Leibniz and Degrees of Perception." *Journal of the History of Philosophy* 19: 447-79.
- Brower, Jeffrey E. and Susan Brower-Toland. 2008. "Aquinas on Mental Representation: Concepts and Intentionality." *Philosophical Review* 117: 193-243.
- Brown, Deborah. 2007. "Objective Being in Descartes: That Which We Know or That By Which We Know?" In *Representation and Objects of Thought in Medieval Philosophy*, edited by Henrik Lagerlund, 133-51. Hampshire, UK: Ashgate.
- Cajetan. 1964. *Commentary on St. Thomas Aquinas' On Being and Essence*. Translated by Lotte Kendzierski and Francis C. Wade. Milwaukee: Marquette University Press.
- Caston, Victor. 1999. "Something and Nothing: The Stoics on Concepts and Universals." *Oxford Studies in Ancient Philosophy* 17.
- Costa, Emanuele. 2021. "Spinoza and Scholastic Philosophy." In *A Companion to Spinoza*, edited by Yitzhak Y. Melamed. Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell.
- Crane, Tim. 2013. *The Objects of Thought*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

- Della Rocca, Michael. 2020. *The Parmenidean Ascent*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- . 2008. *Spinoza*. New York: Routledge.
- . 2003. "The Power of an Idea: Spinoza's Critique of Pure Will." *Noûs* 37: 200-231.
- . 1996. *Representation and the Mind-Body Problem in Spinoza*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Demos, Raphael. 1933. "Spinoza's Doctrine of Privation." *Philosophy* 8: 155-166.
- Descartes, René. 1984. *The Philosophical Writings of Descartes*, vol. 1. Edited by John Cottingham, Robert Stoothoff, and Dugald Murdoch. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Garrett, Don. 2018. "Spinoza's *Conatus* Argument," in *Nature and Necessity in Spinoza's Philosophy*, 352-92. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Gartenberg, Zachary. 2020. "Reconceiving Spinoza: by Samuel Newlands." *British Journal for the History of Philosophy* 28: 405-408.
- Geach, Peter. 1957. *Mental Acts*. London: Routledge & Kegan Paul.
- Hoffman, Paul. 2009. "Direct Realism, Intentionality, and the Objective Being of Ideas," in *Essays on Descartes*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Jorgensen, Larry M. 2019. *Leibniz's Naturalized Philosophy of Mind*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Klima, Gyula. 1993. "The Changing Role of *Entia Rationis* in Mediaeval Semantics and Ontology: A Comparative Study with a Reconstruction." *Synthese* 96: 25-58.
- Kulstad, Mark A. 1977. "Leibniz's Conception of Expression." *Studia Leibnitiana* 9: 55-76.
- Lærke, Mogens. 2011. "Spinoza's Cosmological Argument in the *Ethics*." *Journal of the History of Philosophy* 49: 439-462.

- Langton, Rae. 2000. "Locke's Relations and God's Good Pleasure." *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society* 100: 75-91.
- Leibniz, G.W. 1996. *New Essays on Human Understanding*, translated by Peter Remnant and Jonathan Bennett. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- . 1989. *Philosophical Essays* [AG], translated by Roger Ariew and Daniel Garber. Indianapolis: Hackett.
- . 1970. *Philosophical Papers and Letters* [L], 2nd ed. Edited by Leroy E. Loemker. Dordrecht: Reidel.
- . 1923—. *Sämtliche Schriften und Briefe* [A]. Edited by the Deutschen Akademie der Wissenschaften zu Berlin. Berlin: Akademie Verlag.
- McRae, Robert. 1965. "'Idea' as a Philosophical Term in the Seventeenth Century." *Journal of the History of Ideas* 26: 175-190.
- Melamed, Yitzhak Y. 2013. *Spinoza's Metaphysics: Substance and Thought*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Morrison, John. 2013. "The Relation between Conception and Causation in Spinoza's Metaphysics." *Philosophers' Imprint* 13: 1-17.
- Mugnai, Massimo. 1992. *Leibniz' Theory of Relations*. Stuttgart: Franz Steiner Verlag.
- Newlands, Samuel. 2014. "Leibniz on Privations, Limitations, and the Metaphysics of Evil." *Journal of the History of Philosophy* 52: 281-308.
- . 2010. "Another Kind of Spinozistic Monism." *Noûs* 44: 469-502.
- Normore, Calvin. 1986. "Meaning and Objective Being: Descartes and His Sources." In *Essays on Descartes' Meditations*, edited by Amélie Oksenberg Rorty. Berkeley: University of California Press.

- Novotný, Daniel D. 2013. *Ens rationis from Suárez to Caramuel: A Study in Scholasticism of the Baroque Era*. New York: Fordham University Press.
- Perkins, Franklin. 1999. "Ideas and Self-Reflection in Leibniz." *The Leibniz Review* 9: 43-63.
- Primus, Kristin. 2021. "Reflective Knowledge." In *A Companion to Spinoza*, edited by Yitzhak Y. Melamed. Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell.
- Prior, A.N. 1971. *Objects of Thought*. Oxford: Clarendon.
- Rutherford, Donald. 1995. "Philosophy and Language in Leibniz." In *The Cambridge Companion to Leibniz*, edited by Nicholas Jolley, 224-269. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Shields, Christopher. 2012. "Shadows of Beings: Francisco Suárez's *Entia Rationis*." In *The Philosophy of Francisco Suárez*, edited by Benjamin Hill and Henrik Lagerlund. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Silverman, Alex. 2016. "Two Meanings of 'Attribute' in Spinoza." *Archiv für Geschichte der Philosophie* 98: 55-88.
- Simmons, Alison. 2001. "Changing the Cartesian Mind: Leibniz on Sensation, Representation, and Consciousness." *Philosophical Review* 110: 31-75.
- Spinoza, Baruch. 1985. *The Collected Works of Spinoza* [C], vol 1. Translated by Edwin Curley. Princeton: Princeton University Press.
- . 1925. *Spinoza Opera* [G], edited by Carl Gebhardt. 4 vols. Hildesheim: Georg Olms.
- Stump, Eleonore. 2003. *Aquinas*. New York: Routledge.
- Suárez, Francisco. 2009. *Disputationes Metaphysicae*. Edited by Charles Berton. Paris: Vives, 1856-61. Reprinted by Georg Olms.
- . 1995. *On Beings of Reason*, translated by John P. Doyle. Milwaukee: Marquette University Press.

Swoyer, Chris. 1995. "Leibnizian Expression." *Journal of the History of Philosophy* 33: 65-99.

Wilson, Margaret. 1999. "Confused vs. Distinct Perception in Leibniz: Consciousness, Representation, and God's Mind," in *Ideas and Mechanism*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.

Yolton, John W. 1975. "Ideas and Knowledge in Seventeenth-Century Philosophy." *Journal of the History of Philosophy* 13: 145-165.