

## CONFUSED IDEAS

by Margaret D. Wilson

### INTRODUCTION

It is widely known that Leibniz was severely critical of Descartes's use of the notions of clear and distinct (versus obscure and confused) ideas. Commentators frequently cite with approval Leibniz's various statements that a "criterion" or "mark" of clarity and distinctness is required, if the notions are to have any epistemological value. Leibniz's own, very pervasive, use of the notions of distinctness and confusion in ideas is less frequently examined. With the exception of some excellent, but largely expository work by Robert McRae, this aspect of Leibniz's philosophy does not seem to have received much systematic consideration in the English language literature.<sup>1</sup> I believe that this relative neglect is unwarranted. One purpose of the present paper is to argue that Leibniz's treatment of confused and distinct cognitions involves a very fundamental advance over Descartes's, although the feature in question is not one that Leibniz himself stressed. Unlike Descartes, Leibniz fairly consistently observes a distinction between *concepts* on the one hand, and *particular presentings* on the other hand.<sup>2</sup> (His position can therefore be construed as an important and perhaps influential antecedent to Kant's celebrated distinction between intuitions and concepts.) That is, Leibniz defines 'confused' and 'distinct' in one way to distinguish different levels of conceptual ability, and in another way to distinguish (alleged) features of perceptions. (There is also a third sense of 'confused' in Leibniz's writings that may apply to both categories of cognition.<sup>3</sup>) It is particularly interesting to compare Leibniz's treatment of sensory ideas with Descartes's. Leibniz, like Descartes, regards sense *perceptions* as necessarily and ineluctably confused; and he also uses sensory *concepts* as paradigms of the sort of confusion that may be ascribed to one's conceptual repertoire. Recognition of the fact that he does not regard the two as "confused" in the same sense of the term is important both in interpreting some puzzling Leibnizian passages, and in understanding his relation to Descartes. After developing these points in

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more detail, I will go on to discuss critically Leibniz's notion of confused *concepts*, and his use of sensory paradigms in this connection. I will not, however, attempt to evaluate in any detail his theory of confused *perception*; nor will I consider here his most central and original use of the notion of confusedness: his doctrine that every substance "expresses in a confused way" all of its past and future states, and everything that happens in its world. The latter notions certainly merit critical examination, and they are closely inter-related with the points I do discuss. They are so complex and difficult, however, that they seem to demand separate and systematic treatment.

I will begin with a brief review of relevant features of Descartes's position.

### I

Descartes speaks variously of clear and distinct (or obscure and confused) knowledge, comprehension, ideas, perceptions, conception, notions, and so forth. In the *Principles* a "clear perception" is defined as one "that is present and open to an attending mind: just as we say that that is clearly seen by us, which, being present to the viewing eye, affects it sufficiently strongly and openly" (I, xlv: AT VIII-1, 21-22). A "distinct perception" is one which is not only clear, but also "so separate (*sejuncta*) from all others and (so) precise, that it contains in itself nothing else at all, except what is clear" (ibid., 22). A perception that is not clear and distinct is obscure and confused. The terms of these definitions suggest that what is at issue is the way in which particular entities are presented to the mind—as of course does the word 'perception' itself. And, in fact, in the next Principle Descartes proceeds to apply his distinction to the "perception of a pain." Two points need to be noted, however. First, Descartes thinks we clearly and distinctly perceive things (e.g., the nature of a body) "by the understanding," and he implies (for instance in the "wax passage" towards the end of Meditation II) that achieving clarity and distinctness in one's cognition is at least partly a matter of getting straight about what is contained in one's basic concepts. Second, while Descartes invariably characterizes sense perceptions—or at least those not "exhibiting" extension, figure, or motion—as confused, it is not at all evident how his definition of the "distinct" fails to apply to them. In what way do *they* "contain in themselves" what is not clear?<sup>4</sup> In fact, what he usually seems to mean in calling sensations "confused" is that they have very limited cognitive content (if any): they do not "exhibit to us" "real" properties in any intelligible way. (Similarly, Descartes's original sensible notion of the wax was amiss, not because there were undistinguished elements of the *sense experience(s)*, but because the true (intelligible) notion of wax was not yet before his mind's eye.)<sup>5</sup> What Descartes should probably say is that our "perception" (understanding) of the nature of body, and of physical properties, is confused insofar as we rely on sense perceptions. Only internal reflection and analysis enable

us to grasp accurately “what is contained in” the idea of body, and distinguishes body “from all else.” Sense perceptions, or sensations, can themselves be called “confused,” within Cartesian parameters, only by a sort of conflation. They *fail to help us toward* the distinct and conceptually perfect understanding of the nature of things that our innate ideas can ultimately yield, once the discerning “attention of the mind” is directed toward them. This observation is very important to understanding the major differences between Descartes’s position and that of Leibniz.

II

Leibniz too uses ‘clear,’ ‘distinct,’ ‘confused,’ and ‘obscure’ to qualify a wide range of terms: ‘idea,’ ‘expression,’ ‘representation,’ ‘notion,’ ‘cognition,’ ‘perception,’ ‘thought,’ even ‘attribute,’ to mention some of the most important examples. But whereas Descartes seems to move from talk of clear and distinct *x*’s to talk of clear and distinct *y*’s without observing any definite and significant distinctions, this is not at all the case with Leibniz. Although certain qualifications will have to be spelled out later, it is generally the case that when Leibniz talks of distinct or confused *notions* or *ideas*, he has in mind questions about conceptual abilities. When he speaks of distinct or confused *perceptions*, on the other hand, he is concerned with features of particular-presentings. Confusion in our *ideas* is to a considerable extent correctable; but the sort of confusion found in perceptions is largely ineluctable, unremovable: indeed, it belongs to the nature of the perceptions themselves. I will now consider these two types of “confusion” in turn—with brief mention of a third sense of ‘confusion’ that may apply more broadly than the other two.

According to the *Meditations on Knowledge, Truth, and Ideas*, we have a clear but confused notion or idea of things of a certain sort (say  $\phi$ ’s), if we can recognize them when we encounter them, but cannot explain what distinguishes them from other entities (see *P.S.* IV, 422). Our notion is distinct as well as clear if we can state a “mark” of  $\phi$ -ness—in other words give an account of our ability to pick out  $\phi$ ’s. This essay dates from 1684. In a much later work, the *New Essays*, Leibniz makes the same point, saying that we have a distinct idea when we can give “the definition or the reciprocal marks” (II, xxxi, §§1, 2: *DA* ed., p. 266).<sup>6</sup> The one exception to this rule is constituted by genuinely “primitive” notions; as Leibniz writes:

There is, however, also a distinct cognition of an indefinable notion, when it is *primitive* or known by itself, that is, when it is irresolvable and only understood through itself. . . . (*P.S.* IV, 423)

Leibniz identifies the primitives with “the absolute Attributes of God” (*ibid.*, 425).

It seems evident that these distinctions between clear and obscure, and distinct and confused ideas are distinctions of conceptual abilities. I can be said to "have" the concept of a Darwin tulip, for example, if I can pick out, identify, Darwin tulips reliably. I have the concept in a fuller sense if I can perform the further feat of providing explicit identifying marks of this type of tulip. It is also possible to ascribe to someone a sort of marginal possession of a concept, when he can make some accurate marginal use of a term: this would correspond to having an obscure idea, as opposed to having no idea at all. Thus I may have an obscure idea of a Darwin tulip if I know, at least, that it is not the same thing as a Parrot tulip, that it is much larger than a Botanical, and so forth. Lacking *all* these abilities I can hardly be said to possess the concept of a Darwin tulip at all—even though I may feel some faint cognitive stirrings of recollection when I hear the term used.

According to Leibniz, "ideas of one sense," like red, sour, or warm, must be denied the status of primitives. (It would certainly be hard to see how they could be counted among "the absolute Attributes of God.") But the same distinctions apply. Therefore our ideas of these qualities must count as confused insofar as we are unable to articulate distinguishing marks. Thus, I have a clear but confused idea of red if I can identify or pick out red things, but cannot state a mark of redness (see, e.g., *P.S.* IV, 422).

This way of looking at the confused-distinct distinctions has no strict parallels in Descartes's writings. As observed above, Descartes does relate the notion of "distinctness" to that of *distinguishing*: a distinct idea enables us to distinguish its "object" from all else. But Descartes is surely not concerned like Leibniz with the problem of recognizing presented particulars—with concept "application" or use of "kind terms" in the usual sense. Rather, he is concerned with establishing on an *a priori* level the difference between (say) the natures of mind and of matter, between mere sensation and real qualities of bodies. Whether or not we conclude that Leibniz succeeded in making the notion of a distinct idea more *philosophically valuable* than Descartes, he should no doubt be given credit<sup>7</sup> for recognizing the significance of the issue of conceptual competence in relation to (actually or possibly) presented entities.

Before turning to the Leibnizian notion of "confusion" that applies specifically to perceptions, I would like to mention a third sense of the term that Leibniz *may* take to apply to both ideas and perceptions. The state of a mind (or mind-like substance) is called "confused" by Leibniz when it is *wholly unconscious*. Even monads naturally incapable of consciousness have "confused perceptions" in this sense. Thus, bare monads are said to express or perceive confusedly everything that happens in their world—and also completely to lack consciousness and sensation.<sup>8</sup> It is, of course, unproblematic that 'confused perception' and 'confused expression' are used by Leibniz in this sense. But Leibniz also speaks of unconscious *ideas* (a concept,

he says in one place, is a conscious idea).<sup>9</sup> And he sometimes identifies ideas as “expressions.”<sup>10</sup> It is possible, therefore, that he might be prepared to speak of “confused ideas,” in the sense of implicit or unrecognized conceptual abilities. I am, however, unable to cite direct textual support for this suggestion.

But ‘confused’ also carries another sense in Leibniz’s writings. While this sense is related to the one just considered, it definitely applies specifically to perceptions, as opposed to conceptual abilities. In *this* important sense, a perception is confused when the person perceiving *is* conscious of *it*, but is not conscious of “all that is in it,” of the elements that “compose” it. Leibniz holds that all sense perceptions are confused in this sense; that is, all are composed of “elements” that we do not—and in fact cannot—distinguish or discern.<sup>11</sup> The “simplicity” or homogeneity of such perceptions is therefore only *apparent*.

I pointed out above that Descartes, while treating sense perceptions as “confused,” provides no way of understanding how they fail to satisfy his definition of a distinct idea, as “containing nothing at all within it except what is clear.” Notice now that on Leibniz’s account sense perceptions do satisfy the original Cartesian conception of confusion. It is not the case that “all that is in them” is clear to the perceiving mind.

Leibniz offers several different reasons for this rather extraordinary doctrine. One type of reason has to do with his conception of the cause-effect relation. According to Leibniz the “effect corresponds to the cause”—i.e., *everything* present in the cause must have some corresponding element in the effect.<sup>12</sup> But the “motions” that cause sense-perceptions—considered either in the object or in the body—are indefinitely, indeed infinitely, complex.<sup>13</sup> Hence corresponding complexity *must* be present in the sensation that results from these motions, even if we are not aware of it and cannot become aware of it.

Other lines of reasoning to the same conclusion<sup>14</sup> derive directly from the Principle of Sufficient Reason and the Principle of Continuity, respectively. Descartes had held the position that there was only an arbitrary connection between experienced sensations on the one hand, and the events in the brain that give rise to them on the other hand. Leibniz rejects this view as contrary to the rational order of things. It is, he says, “not the custom of God to act with so little order and reason.”<sup>15</sup> If all sensations were really simple, Leibniz seems to believe, the notion of an arbitrary relation would be unavoidable. If we suppose an implicit complexity in sensation, however, we may then further suppose that there is some rational or intelligible relation between, say, the complex physical “cause” of the sensation of yellow and that sensation itself—a relation that does not obtain between that cause and some *other* sensation (say the sensation of blue).<sup>16</sup>

Leibniz argues also from the Principle of Continuity that every perception of which we are aware must be composed of parts of which we are not aware.

For instance he comments in the *New Essays*: "that which is noticeable must be composed of parts which are not, (since) nothing can arise suddenly, thought no more than movement" (II, i, §18: D.A. ed., p. 117; cf. II, ix, §4: p. 134). He wants to claim, then, that we cannot go "*tout d'un coup*" from a state of zero perception to a state of perceiving consciously; such abrupt transitions are not permitted by the Principle of Continuity. The suggested alternative seems to be that a conscious perception emerges from a sort of temporal summation of "*petites perceptions*" which belong to and contribute to the whole although they are not separately discerned—either in it, or as its conditions.

Additional considerations Leibniz adduces on behalf of his theory of sensation include the claim that *we know* that green is a composite of blue and yellow, yet green appears no less "simple" than the other two colors. (Thus apparent simplicity does not *entail* actual simplicity.)<sup>17</sup> Also, Leibniz mentions the example of a spinning cog wheel: as the wheel moves faster we are increasingly unable to discriminate the individual cogs, and eventually we "perceive" only a homogeneous blur.<sup>18</sup> His suggestion, I take it, is that there is no good reason to deny that the individual cogs contribute any less to our perception when they are moving fast than when they are moving slowly.<sup>19</sup> We should conclude rather that they contribute to and are implicit in our "blur" perception, even though not individually discerned. Sensory perceptions, such as color, odor, sound, etc., should be understood analogously.

Leibniz states very explicitly—especially in the *New Essays*—that the confusedness of sense perceptions is essential to them:

[Colors, tastes, etc.] merit [the] name of phantoms, rather than that of *qualities*, or even of *ideas*. . . . To wish that these confused phantoms remain, and that nevertheless one distinguishes (*demêle*) their ingredients by the phantasy itself, is to contradict oneself; it is to want to have the pleasure of being deceived by an agreeable perspective, and to wish that at the same time the eye see the deception, which would be to spoil it. (*Ibid.*, pp. 403-404)

What this passage does *not* tell us is whether it is *possible* to "distinguish the ingredients" of sense perceptions by the "phantasy," supposing one is willing to give up the initial experience of the "phantom." In one place Leibniz suggests that we fail to perceive *petites perceptions* only because we are distracted by their multitude, or because they are effaced or obscured by greater perceptions.<sup>20</sup> This way of talking seems to leave open the possibility that by a special effort of mind we *could* become aware of the elements of which our perceptions of blue (for example) are composed. But Leibniz does not actually say this, and the view seems extremely implausible. Perhaps he means to hold that *if we could, per impossibile*, reduce our experience at a given time to a handful of *petites perceptions*, there would be nothing to rule out our becoming aware of them. But in fact there will always be an overwhelming multitude in any sense perception, and the mind in this situation is helpless to distinguish them.<sup>21</sup>

My argument so far has proceeded as if the distinction between confused ideas and confused perceptions were (at least textually) perfectly sharp and unproblematic. Now it is necessary to take account of some of the qualifications I mentioned at the outset. First, it must be conceded that throughout the *New Essays* Leibniz speaks of "ideas of sense" being confused in the sense of being constituted out of *petites perceptions*, of which we are unaware. (Note the use of the term 'idea' in the passage quoted in the previous paragraph.) I do not think this fact in itself is of any great significance. Locke, of course, speaks of "ideas of sense," meaning sensory *experiences*; Leibniz simply falls into his antagonist's terminology.<sup>22</sup> But there is another problem of greater importance. Even in the *Meditations on Knowledge, Truth and Ideas*, with Locke nowhere in view, Leibniz seems to run together his thesis that sensory perceptions are confused (implicitly complex) with the claim that we cannot provide a "distinguishing mark" for picking out their qualities. He writes:

Cognition [*cognitio*] is . . . clear when it gives me the ability to recognize the thing represented, and clear [cognition] in turn is either confused or distinct. It is *confused* when I cannot separately enumerate marks sufficient to discriminate the thing from others, even though the thing really has such marks and requisites, into which its notion can be resolved: thus colors, odors, tastes, and other particular objects of the senses we indeed recognize sufficiently clearly and discriminate from each other, but by the simple testimony of the senses, and not by stable marks; hence we cannot explain to a blind man what red is, nor can we explain such things to others, except by bringing them into the presence of the thing, and causing them to see, smell or taste it . . . , even though it is certain that the notions of these qualities are composite and can be resolved, since they surely have their causes. (*P.S.* IV, 422-423; emphasis in text)

In this passage, and others like it, Leibniz runs together the two main senses of 'confused' that I have distinguished, to obtain the thesis that we have only "confused ideas" of "the objects of the senses." Thus, as the last few lines of the quotation reveal, the implicit compositeness of sensory experiences is taken to rule out the view that sensory ideas or notions are primitive.<sup>23</sup> The necessary confusedness of our perceptions of colors, odors, etc., is then taken to show that we only (*can only?*) have confused ideas of these qualities. For the confusion of these sensory experiences is such that we are unable to "notice in them" any mark that would enable us to *say* how red, for instance, is distinguished from green. Because our experience of these qualities can never be freed of "confusion," we cannot convert our conceptual power of mere *recognition* to that capacity for articulate explication signaled by the ascription of a distinct idea. Thus we cannot "explain to a blind man what red is."

I believe that Leibniz gets involved in a confusion in this and similar passages. To see that this is so, consider first the question where the physical theory of sensible qualities could fit into Leibniz's account. On the one hand,

the view that sense experiences are "confused" (implicitly complex) is based to a considerable extent on the view that these experiences stand in some unique relation (causal or expressive) to the indefinitely complex motions in bodies postulated by theoretical physics. Yet on the other hand, the running together of the claim that our sense experiences are confused, with the claim that our concepts of sensory qualities are confused, seems to negate the possibility of a physical-theoretical account of sensible qualities. For if we are allowed to suppose that a *red* object, for example, is just one that reflects light waves of such and such frequency in such and such circumstances, there is no obvious reason why we could not ascribe to ourselves a distinct *notion* of red, even on the supposition that our (sense) *perceptions* are all confused. We would be able to say, for instance, that red objects differ from all others in that *they* reflect wave-lengths in range  $l_x - l_y$ . Further, on this physical or scientific understanding of 'red' there is no barrier at all to explaining to a blind man "what red is"—since, presumably, he can understand physical optics as well as the next person. (*His* ideas, too, could come to be distinct.) In other words, the doctrine that our sense experiences of colors, odors, etc., are all confused will lead to the conclusion that our concepts of these qualities are all confused, only if the qualities are somehow identified with the experiences (or if we lack cognitive resources other than direct sensing).

Leibniz himself does, in a number of places, formulate theoretical identifications of sensory qualities with (potentially) describable states of physical objects. Thus he suggests that red may be the "revolving of certain small globules," and heat may be "the expansion of air."<sup>24</sup> With respect to colors, he specifically indicates that distinct ideas may be derived from optics, and that there is no barrier to instructing the blind in this science.<sup>25</sup> These statements might lead one to suppose that his linking of confused perceptions with confused ideas (in the *Meditations* and elsewhere) is meant to be contingent upon a low level of scientific understanding. That is, he *could* be saying in such passages that sense experiences *alone* will not provide distinct concepts of sensory qualities; that someone *ignorant of optics* cannot "explain to a blind man what red is," even though such a person can easily recognize red things. In my view, this is what he *should* be saying, in order to maintain a coherent position. There is evidence, however, that Leibniz did not have one consistent way of thinking about sensory qualities, and hence that such a rationalization of the *Meditations* passage is misleading. For even in passages where Leibniz seems to endorse the possibility of physical-theoretical accounts of sensible qualities, he *still* denies that one can know what red or heat is unless one has the appropriate sensations. (In these passages he tends to alternate between saying that the physical state *is* red or heat, and saying that the physical state *causes* red or heat.) For example, in *On the Elements of Natural Science* (1682-1684) he first proposes that heat must ultimately be understood in terms of physical theory:



*Simple attributes . . . are simple by their own nature and for intellectual reasons, or they are simple with respect to our senses. As an example of an attribute simple in nature can be offered 'to be itself' or 'to endure.' An attribute simple with respect to the senses, on the other hand, would be heat, for the senses do not show us by what mechanism the state of a body is produced which brings about the sensation of warmth in us, yet the mind properly perceives that warmth is not something absolute which is understood in itself but that it will only then be adequately understood when we explain of what it consists or distinctly describe its proximate cause—perhaps the expansion of air, or rather some particular motion of a fluid which is thinner than air. (Loemker, p. 285)<sup>26</sup>*

Yet in the next breath Leibniz is telling us that we know what heat or light is, only if we actually have the sensation of heat or of light:

*Confused attributes are those which are indeed composite in themselves or by intellectual principles but are simple to the senses and whose definition therefore cannot be explained. These attributes can be imported not by description but only by pointing them out to the senses. (Ibid.)*

He goes on to indicate that cold-blooded people in a sunless land could not “be made to understand what heat is merely by describing it”; to “learn what heat is” they would have to *experience* it—for instance by having a fire kindled near them. “Similarly,” Leibniz concludes, “a man born blind could learn the whole optics yet not acquire any idea of light” (ibid.).

Leibniz tends to alternate, then, between saying that we can, through physics, develop distinct, verbally communicable ideas of sensible qualities, and indicating that we can acquire the ideas of these qualities only through “confused” sensory experiences (whence it follows that the ideas themselves are confused or uncommunicable). Similarly, he vacillates between saying that physics tells us what sensible qualities are or consist in, and saying that physics tells us the causes of sensible qualities. Insofar as he inclines to the former view, he thinks of sensible qualities as properties in physical objects that happen to be discriminable by the senses. Insofar as he inclines to the latter view, he thinks of the nature of a sensible quality as completely bound up with the nature of sensory experience (cf. the talk of “confused attributes” in the passage just quoted).<sup>27</sup>

This ambivalence about sensory qualities seems to be an unrationalized, pervasive feature of Leibniz’s thinking. It tends to muddle his discussions of *confused ideas*, by conflating the confusedness proper to concepts (on Leibniz’s own account) with that proper to perceptions. It is perhaps worth remarking, however, that the ambivalence in question is hardly trivial or idiosyncratic. It reflects, to borrow some phrases, the superposition of the manifest image on the scientific image, the naive on the causal viewpoint. Thus, we do not naturally think of “perceived red” as just a sensation like pain. For we perceive it *in* the objects of the manifest image. From this point of view it is natural to think of it as a quality in its own right, that happens to

be completely bound up with perceptual experience. From this point of view, to “know what red is” *does* require seeing red. The peculiar thing about Leibniz is that he can move so flexibly between the manifest and scientific images—even within a paragraph or two—in considering the issue of “what red is.” It is amazing that he was able to overlook such a conspicuous appearance of inconsistency. (Descartes’s contempt for the manifest image was deeper and more consistent: for Descartes, perceived red is a “confused” sensation and nothing else.)

There is also, I think, another way of understanding Leibniz’s ambivalent treatment of sensory qualities. This is found in his way of categorizing conceptual abilities as confused or distinct. Following Cartesian dogma, Leibniz seems to assume automatically that one’s “idea” cannot be distinct without being clear, though it can be clear without being distinct. Given Leibniz’s definitions, this hierarchical ordering would have the consequence that while one can be able to recognize without being able to state a mark, one cannot state a mark unless one is able to recognize. Now the blind person in the normal course of things does *not* have the ability to pick out or recognize red objects in his environment. It follows, on the stated assumptions, that he does not have a *confused* idea of red. *Ergo* (on this line of reasoning) he *must* lack a distinct one: there *has* to be a sense in which he does not “know what red is.”

I do not mean to claim, of course, that Leibniz’s treatment of knowledge of sensory qualities is consistently dominated by such a hierarchical assumption about the classification of ideas. As we have seen, he does sometimes say in so many words that a blind man can have a distinct conception of colors. The point, again, is just that his ambivalence can be understood in light of certain conflicting assumptions or perspectives, which may to some extent alternate in his thought.

To sum up the main points of my interpretation: Leibniz, in treating the issue of clarity and distinctness, recognizes clearly if implicitly a distinction between conceptual abilities and features of particular presentings or perceptions. In the case of the latter, Leibniz’s theory of sense perception enables us to see why the term “confused” is supposed to be generally applicable—whereas Descartes’s fails to do so. However, Leibniz’s distinction between confused concepts and confused perceptions is blurred in those passages where he uses cognition of qualities proper to one sense as paradigms of “both” types of confusion. What is important to recognize, however, is that insofar as sensory qualities are identified through the concepts of physics (as Leibniz frequently does identify them) the (alleged) ineluctable confusion in our sense-perception of them does not at all entail that our ideas or notions of them must be confused. To lose sight of this fact (as Leibniz himself sometimes does) is to lose sight of one of the more satisfactory and historically significant features of Leibniz’s epistemology: the distinction between the categories of conceptual abilities and perceptions.

## III

I turn now to some questions of evaluation. As I indicated at the outset, I will not undertake here any systematic evaluation of the complicated theory that sense perceptions are “confused”—though I will conclude with a few peripheral remarks concerning it. I believe, however, that some fairly conclusive observations can be made concerning Leibniz’s manner of defining the distinction between confused and distinct notions, and will take up that issue first.

It seems evident that *any* serious account of concept-possession must accord some fundamental place to a person’s ability to *recognize* presented particulars as  $\phi$ ’s or  $\psi$ ’s. Leibniz’s focus on this level of ability makes good sense. Further, it seems unproblematic that there is a way of “knowing what  $\phi$ ’s are” that goes beyond merely being able to recognize  $\phi$ ’s. One of Leibniz’s favorite examples is convincing: an assayer has a much better knowledge of *what gold is* than I do, even though I *can* generally recognize gold objects when I encounter them. While there seems to be no good philosophical reason for retaining the Cartesian terminology, we can hardly deny Leibniz the right to stipulate that mere recognitional ability counts as a “confused idea,” while something more, such as the assayer’s knowledge of gold, is required for one’s idea to count as distinct.<sup>28</sup>

The problem lies in trying to lay down conditions on the “something more” in a way that seems really to support an epistemically significant distinction. There are, after all, very few sorts of cases where recognitional ability is *wholly* divorced from the ability to state *some* salient features of the sort of thing one can recognize. And I do not think it is clear that such minimal articulateness with respect to  $\phi$ ’s should be one of the two or three major criteria of whether and to what degree one “knows what  $\phi$ ’s are.” Do we want to say, on the other hand, that a person has a distinct idea of  $\phi$ ’s just in case he can state a necessary and sufficient condition of  $\phi$ -ness—a “reciprocal mark,” as Leibniz suggests in one place? This proposal seems both too weak and too strong. Too weak, because such knowledge could in many cases be relatively trivial. Thus, I might know that a certain species of mammal (of which I happen to have heard the name) is the only one in existence with greenish toenails—and know absolutely nothing else about these mammals. It would be ridiculous to compare my knowledge of this species with the assayer’s knowledge of gold. The proposal seems too strong, on the other hand, because one can know so very much about different types of entities, without being able to produce with any great confidence a list of properties that members of each type have in common, and share (as a set) with no other entities. It seems that Leibniz’s conception of a *distinct* idea or notion is not sufficiently developed to bear very heavy epistemological weight.

Leibniz’s way of distinguishing confused and distinct ideas is also objectionable precisely because of its implication that our ideas of sense (of the

manifest image) are on exactly the same regrettable epistemological footing as our most minimal abilities to recognize animals and flowers. Even if one should grant Leibniz his claim that sensory perceptions are "confused" in the relevant sense (i.e., implicitly complex), it still does not seem true that our inability to state a mark of (manifest) redness is the same sort of problem as a given person's inability to state a mark by which to recognize a particular type of bird or tree. In the latter case, but not the former, there exists the real possibility of converting one's idea from "confused" to "distinct" by reflection on, and generalization from, one's direct experience (sensory presentings) of the entities in question. In the former case, as we have seen, the story is far more complicated. Leibniz's position on the nature and knowledge of sensory qualities involves a lot of philosophy, a lot of (not always consistent) theoretical commitments. His effort to assimilate this issue to the distinction between recognitional and articulate knowledge of "what  $\phi$ 's are" is both oversimplifying and highly misleading.

Leibniz's distinction between confused and distinct perceptions is much harder to evaluate than the distinction between confused and distinct notions, partly because it is more obscure and difficult and partly because it is much more fundamental to Leibniz's system. In the present context I will make just a few observations. First, we should resist the temptation to reject out of hand the claim that sense perceptions are "confused" (on the grounds that the notion of a perception or perception-part of which we can never become aware is inconsistent). Leibniz's *petites perceptions*, like the Kantian manifold which they prefigure,<sup>29</sup> are postulated because of the dictates of a fairly deeply thought-out theory. To know what to think about them we must try to understand the theory first. Second, one could agree that the arguments Leibniz presents, in the *New Essays* and elsewhere, for the implicit complexity of all sense perceptions, involve unacceptable or dubious *general* principles, without necessarily dismissing his theory. The central issue that must be addressed is the following: are there any grounds at all for inferring from complexity in the object, cause, or conditions of an experience on the one hand, to complexity in the experience itself on the other hand? Rationalist principles about the cause-effect relation, or about God's "custom," provide a handy basis for a positive answer. The question retains some interest, however, even if one rejects these principles as a basis for argument. Sometimes Leibniz himself seems to present it as simply a fact about *perception* that we could not perceive the result of the co-action of minute motions if we did not perceive the minute motions themselves.<sup>30</sup> This is a view that might be analyzed and evaluated independently of general dogma about the correspondence of effect to cause.

Finally, we should notice that Leibniz's theory of the implicit complexity of sense experiences follows directly from his account of representation or expression, together with the view that perception is a form of representation

or expression.<sup>31</sup> That is, the theory of confused perceptions can be directly derived from this aspect of Leibniz's position without benefit of any rationalist premisses about the cause-effect relation in general,<sup>32</sup> or God's rational ordering of things. In other words, to reject the view of sense perception as intrinsically confused, one must either reject Leibniz's theory of representation or expression, or deny that sense perception is a form of representation or expression. According to Leibniz, one thing expresses another if there is a "constant and regulated" or "exact and natural" relation between what we can say of the two things, or of the relations of their elements.<sup>33</sup> Some of Leibniz's examples suggest that there must indeed be a one-to-one correspondence between the elements of the expressing entity and the elements of the expressed. (This is suggested, for example, by his description of a geometrical projection expressing the figure projected: "each point of the one corresponding, following a certain relation, to each point on the other" [*N.E.* II, viii, §13: D.A. ed., p. 131].) If such a condition is intended, then (it seems), a perception can express a colored object only if there is an element in the perception corresponding to every feature of the colored object (e.g., each feature of its surface that gives rise to its reflective properties). And by this reasoning we would arrive again at the full-blooded Leibnizian view that every sense perception is implicitly as complex as its infinitely complex cause. However, some of Leibniz's own examples of expression—models and maps<sup>34</sup>—indicate that he probably does not intend this improbably strong position when he defines 'expression.' The important point is that even if *exact* or one-to-one correspondence is not required, the theory of expression will still require *some* "regulated" relation between the features of the perception and features of the perceived. And this, I presume, would require *some* sort of internal complexity in the perceptions themselves. But suppose Locke and Leibniz are right in saying that the perception of a patch of red or blue of a single shade is (at least) *apparently* homogeneous. It will follow immediately that there is an *implicit* or unrecognized internal complexity in such perceptions—and hence that they are, on Leibniz's definitions, confused.

I do not, of course, present these observations as any sort of defense of Leibniz's conception of sense perceptions as intrinsically "confused." What I have tried to suggest is that the theory should not be rejected either as transparently false, or as entirely dependent on transparently outdated premisses.

## NOTES

The following abbreviations are used in this paper: AT = *Oeuvres de Descartes*, published by Charles Adam and Paul Tannery, Nouvelle Présentation (Paris: J. Vrin, 1957—), 12 vols.;

D. A. ed. [of the *Nouveaux essais*]=G. W. Leibniz, *Sämtliche Schriften und Briefe*, published by Deutsche Akademie der Wissenschaften zu Berlin, sixth series, vol. 6 (Berlin: Akademie-Verlag, 1962); *N.E.* = G. W. Leibniz, *New Essays Concerning Human Understanding*, cited by book, chapter, and section, always followed by a page reference to D.A. ed.; *P.S.* = G. W. Leibniz, *Die philosophischen Schriften*, published by C. J. Gerhardt (Hildesheim: Georg Olms, 1965) (unveränderter Nachdruck der Ausgabe Berlin 1875-1890), 7 vols.; Loemker = G. W. Leibniz, *Philosophical Papers and Letters*, a Selection Translated and Edited, with an Introduction by Leroy E. Loemker, second edition (Dordrecht-Holland: Reidel, 1969). All translations into English are mine unless otherwise noted.

1. See R. McRae, *Leibniz: Perception, Apperception and Thought*, (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1976). See especially pp. 36ff. and 72ff. In addition, Hidé Ishiguro provides an interesting discussion of Leibniz's use of the confused-distinct distinction in connection with the "ideas of sensible qualities": See her book, *Leibniz's Philosophy of Logic and Language* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1972), chapter IV.

2. That Leibniz observes such a distinction is already brought out by McRae, in the sections cited above. In other respects, however, our approaches are quite different.

3. Like Descartes, Leibniz sometimes also speaks of the "criteria of clearness and distinctness" in relation to *judgments*. These contexts seem to involve yet a different issue from the three Leibnizian notions of "confusion" that I discuss in the paper: namely, the issue of (experiential or formal) *proof*. See especially *P.S.* IV, 425-426.

4. In his discussion of pain in Principle xlvi Descartes explains that the perception itself may be clear (not distinct); however, the treatment of "material falsity" in the Third Meditation suggests that most sense perceptions should be regarded as obscure. It should be noted that Descartes does not very consistently observe the clear-distinct and obscure-confused distinctions.

5. While I will not take the space to defend this point here, I have argued it in more detail in my book *Descartes* (Routledge & Kegan Paul, forthcoming).

6. In some places in the *New Essays*, though, Leibniz suggests a much stronger criterion of "distinct ideas" than the one he usually espouses. For example, in II, xxiii, §§4-5 (p. 227 in D.A. ed.) he says "the true mark of a clear and distinct idea of an object is the means we have of knowing therein many truths by *a priori* proofs. . . ." He goes on to claim to have shown this "in a discourse on truth and ideas"—evidently a reference to the "Meditations." This is a puzzling statement. Possibly Leibniz is confusing his treatment of distinct ideas in the "Meditations" with that of "real definition"? (Cf. *P.S.* IV, 424-425)

7. Within the context of post-Cartesian philosophy.

8. This use of 'confusion,' too, is different from any Cartesian usage, since Descartes would not have dissociated perception from consciousness to this degree.

9. *Discourse on Metaphysics*, xxvii, *P.S.* IV, 452-453.

10. *Ibid.*; also in "What is an Idea?" *P.S.* VII, 263-264.

11. *Discourse*, xxxiii, *P.S.* IV, 458-459.

12. Cf. *N.E.* II, viii, §15: D.A. ed., p. 131. I believe Leibniz regards this principle as itself somehow a consequence of the Principle of Sufficient Reason. In fact the "different reasons" I distinguish in this and the following paragraphs are not sharply distinguished by Leibniz, as the passage just cited shows.

13. See, e.g., *N.E.* II, i, §17: D.A. ed., p. 117. Here Leibniz is invoking the doctrine that the soul expresses everything in the body, rather than any explicitly causal formulation. On Leibniz's own principles, the notion of expression is indeed more fundamental than that of causality; strictly speaking, the body does *not* cause sensations in the mind. See also *Discourse on Metaphysics*, xxxiii.

14. See note 1, above.

15. *N.E.* II, viii, §13: D.A. ed., p. 131.

16. I have gone over some of this same ground in "Leibniz and Materialism," *Canadian Journal of Philosophy* 3 (June, 1974): 495-513. My reason for repeating myself is that I failed to get some of the points right in the previous discussion—notably the distinction between confused ideas or notions and confused perceptions.

17. *N.E.* IV, vi, §7: D.A. ed., p. 403.

18. *Ibid.*

19. What Leibniz actually says is that "we don't need to suppose that God by His good pleasure gives us this phantom and that it is independent of the teeth of the wheel and their intervals . . . on the contrary we conceive that it is only a confused expression of what occurs in the movement. . . ."

20. *N.E.* II, ix, §1: D.A. ed., p. 134.

21. Sometimes Leibniz says explicitly that it will never be in our power to recognize the *petites perceptions* through sense experience. See, for instance, *N.E.* IV, vi, §7: D.A. ed., p. 403.

22. Compare McRae, *Leibniz*, p. 37, no. 15, and p. 72.

23. It is not clear whether "their causes" is meant to refer to the causes of the notions or the causes of the qualities. What he *should* mean, in my view, is that the *perceptions* have causes; which is to say that the *qualities* are complex, analyzable entities; hence our *notions* are confused until we achieve some kind of analysis.

24. *P.S.* VI, p. 492 and Loemker, p. 285 (and cf. note 26, below).

25. *N.E.* II, ix, §8: D.A. ed., p. 137; cf. *N.E.* III, ii, §3: D.A. ed., p. 287.

26. This work is not published in *P.S.*

27. Ishiguro indicates (*Leibniz's Philosophy of Logic and Language*, pp. 54-56) that for Leibniz the *same* quality can be represented confusedly by a sense-derived idea, or distinctly represented by the physicist. However, I think she overlooks the Leibnizian ambivalence I am concerned to call to attention.

28. Forgetting, for now, the theory of primitive ideas.

29. I owe this observation to discussion with Leon Barnhart. The "theoretical entity" conception is loosely derived from Wilfrid Sellars.

30. See for instance *P.S.* II, 113 (letter to Arnauld).

31. Cf. *P.S.* II, 112.

32. I am assuming that one can detach Leibniz's account of what expression is, from his view that "causation" in general is to be analyzed in terms of it.

33. *P.S.* II, 112; *N.E.* II, viii, §13: D.A. ed., p. 131.

34. *P.S.* VII, 263-264.