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THE EVOLUTION OF THE LEIBNIZIAN NOTION OF “PRIMARY MATTER” AND ITS SCHOLASTIC BACKGROUND

LA EVOLUCIÓN DE LA NOCIÓN LEIBNIZIANA DE “MATERIA PRIMA” Y SUS ANTECEDENTES ESCOLÁSTICOS

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RESUMEN

El objetivo de este artículo es explorar el papel de la noción de materia prima en la filosofía de Leibniz y su evolución por las diferentes etapas de su pensamiento. Este análisis parte de la discusión escolástica sobre la realidad de la materia prima. Se mostrará que Leibniz opta en sus textos de juventud por concebir a la materia prima como un cierto ente (en línea con filósofos escolásticos como Scoto, Ockham y Suárez). En su metafísica madura le quitará cierta actualidad a la materia prima, acercándose a Tomás de Aquino, pero ofreciendo una posición creativa y novedosa.

Palabras clave: Leibniz, materia prima, escolástica, pasividad, inercia.

ABSTRACT

This paper aims to clarify the evolution of the notion of primary matter in Leibniz's philosophy. The analysis takes the scholastic discussion on the reality of primary matter as a framework to explain the development of Leibniz's ideas. It will be shown that

Leibniz argued in his earlier writings for a conception of primary matter as some sort of being (similarly in line with some scholastic philosophers like Scotus, Ockham, and Suarez). In contrast, in his mature metaphysics, he deployed this primary matter of reality, approaching Aquinas's position in a creative and novelty manner.

Keywords: Leibniz, primary matter, scholasticism, passivity, inertia.

I. INTRODUCTION

One of the most remarkable scholastic concepts that Leibniz widely used in his late philosophy is that of “primary matter.” Along with “entelechy,” “primary matter” seems to function as a co-principle of monads, and, thus, its importance in Leibniz's mature metaphysics can hardly be overestimated. In several passages, Leibniz equates the concepts of “materia prima” and “the primitive passive force” or “primitive force of being acted upon.” For instance, a famous passage of *Specimen dynamicum*:

Similarly, passive force is also twofold, either primitive or derivative. And indeed, the primitive force of being acted upon [*vis primitiva patiendi*] or of resisting constitutes that which is called *primary matter* in the schools, if correctly interpreted. This force is that by virtue of which it happens that a body cannot be penetrated by another body, but presents an obstacle to it, and at the same time is endowed with a certain laziness, so to speak, that is, an opposition to motion, nor, further, does it allow itself to be put into motion without somewhat diminishing the force of the body acting on it.¹

Leibniz fits primary matter in his system, on the one hand, to enrich his philosophy with earlier philosophical traditions and, on the other hand, to shed new light on these “obscure” and “discredited” notions. Nevertheless, it is difficult to make sense of a *force*—even in the 17th-century use of the term—that is entirely passive or the only agency of which is to be acted upon. Scholars have widely commented on the paradoxical nature of this passive force.² Indeed,

¹ *Specimen dynamicum* (1695), GM VI, 236 (AG, 119-120). I use the canonical abbreviations for Leibniz's editions (cf. *infra*, “Primary sources”). If needed, translation is referred in parentheses.

² Cf. Shane Duarte, “Leibniz and Prime Matter,” *Journal of the History of Philosophy* 53, no. 3 (2015): 435-460; Maria Rosa Antognazza, “Primary Matter, Primitive Passive Power, and Creaturely Limitation in Leibniz,” *Studia Leibnitiana* 46, no. 2 (2014): 167-86; Robert M. Adams, *Leibniz: Determinist, Theist, Idealist* (New York, 1999; online edn, Oxford Academic, 1 Nov. 2003); Adria Nita, “Leibniz and prime matter,” *Journal of the History of Philosophy* 53, no. 3 (2015): 435-460; James E. McGuire,

it seems odd to propose a real, positive, and metaphysical principle that has no other role but to diminish or frustrate the active force (another real, positive, and metaphysical principle).

Antognazza and Duarte have lately offered similar accounts to solve this puzzle³. Their solution is to link primary matter or primitive passive force to the imperfection of beings, so “primary matter” would only be a way of naming creatures’ finitude. This interpretation offers an attractive solution since the paradoxical nature of a “passive force” disappears when stating that it is not actually a “force” in the strong sense. Although this account seems acceptable in light of Leibniz’s profound metaphysics (both authors make a strong case out for it), it does not solve why Leibniz used particular expressions that imply that the primary matter is a real principle with real effects, namely, *antypipia*, *inertia*, *resistentia*, and *materia secunda*.

This paper aims to trace the evolution of the Leibnizian concept of primary matter in the context of the scholastic discussion of its existence and reality. In particular, it shed some light on Leibniz’s opinion about the actuality of primary matter and its relation to the concept of “inertia” in the phenomenal realm and the notion of “limitation” in the metaphysical realm. To do so, I will explain the discussion’s terms while analyzing the development of Leibniz’s opinion on this issue. It was found that Leibniz transitioned from his earlier view of primary matter as an extended substratum to a rather negative conception. Nevertheless, contrary to some commentators, I argue that Leibniz did not completely deny reality to primary matter; instead, he attributed some degree of reality to passive forces.

II. MATERIA PRIMA: A SCHOLASTIC DISCUSSION IN 17TH-CENTURY PHILOSOPHY

The discussion on the nature and reality of primary matter is old. While Aristotle’s position on this topic is unclear, the scholastic tradition thoroughly debated the details and implications of this doctrine. For instance, Aquinas describes primary matter as “pure potentiality”, that is been understood as having no existence at all (what I will call “strong negativity thesis”) or as having existence but not in its own right (“soft negativity thesis”). In any case,

“‘Labyrinthus Continui’: Leibniz on substance, Activity and Matter,” in *Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz. Critical Assessments III*, ed. Roger Woolhouse (London and New York: Routledge, 1994): 316-317.

3 Cf. Duarte, “Leibniz and Prime Matter”: 435-460; Antognazza, “Primary Matter”: 167-186.

Aquinas argues that not even God could bring formless primary matter to existence, for existence asks for some sort of actuality or form.⁴ This position implies that one of the two principles of natural beings completely lacks actuality.⁵ Most scholastic authors have not outrightly denied the existence of primary matter. They either recognize some degree of actuality in it (Scotus⁶, Suarez⁷, Ockham⁸), —what I will call: “entitative thesis”—, or they follow the doctrine which states that proper existence belongs only to the compound of matter and form —“soft negativity thesis”—. Nonetheless, in late scholasticism, there appears to be a lack of advocates for the complete denial of the existence of prime matter such as the one Antognazza and Duarte ascribe to Leibniz⁹.

In the seventeenth century, the *soft negativity thesis* seems to predominate amongst scholastic philosophy, since pure potentiality implies the need for a form to exist.¹⁰ Nevertheless, some philosophers endorsed the *entitative thesis*¹¹.

4 “Deus non potest facere contradictoria esse simul. Sed materiam esse sine forma implicat contradictionem, eo quod esse materiae importat actum, qui est forma. Non ergo Deus potest facere quod materia sit sine forma”. Aquinas, *Quodlibet* III, q. 1 a. 1 s. c. *Corpus Thomisticum*, <https://www.corpusthomisticum.org/>. Para una más detallada explicación de la materia prima en For a more detailed explanation of primary matter from Aquinas, cf. Aquinas, *De principiis naturae*, II, *Corpus Thomisticum*, <https://www.corpusthomisticum.org/>. Indeed, the relation between actuality and existence is a complicated topic in Aquina’s philosophy. Cf. Stephen L. Brock, “Thomas Aquinas and What Actually Exists”, Kwasniewski, P. (ed.), *Wisdom’s Apprentice. Thomistic Essays in Honor of L. Dewan OP* (Washington, D.C.: Catholic University of America, 2007): 13-39. However, Scotus will criticize Aquinas precisely on these terms, namely, by arguing that, if primary matter lacks any actuality, it should be nothing at all.

5 “What makes Aquinas’s position especially hard to defend is that form and matter are supposed to be really distinct, and a real distinction is often thought to require two-way separability. But separability is a much more complicated matter than is generally realized”. Robert Pasnau, *Metaphysical Themes 1274-1671* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011): 38-39.

6 “Qui DICUNT materiam esse primo modo ens in potentia, dicunt eam simpliciter esse non-ens, nec videntur aliquo modo salvare intentionem Aristotelis”. *Quaestiones super libros Metaphysicorum Aristotelis*, Lib. VII. q. 5. I. 135

7 “[O]portet ergo loqui de materia ut est actualis entitas, vel, quod idem est, quatenus secundum se habet proprium actum existendi distinctum ab actu formae”. Franciscus, Suarez: *Disputationes metaphysicae*, disp. XIII. 5, 7.

8 “Non solum autem materia prima est illa quae est in potentia ad omnes formas omnium specierum formarum generabilium et corruptibilium, sed etiam est quaedam res actu existens et est ingenerabilis et incorruptibilis”. Guillelmus de Ockham, *Summula philosophiae naturalis*, ch. 11, *Opera* VI, 186.

9 Cf. Pasnau, *Metaphysical Themes*, 37. Accordingly, Antognazza rightly describes this position as a rejection of Leibniz to the Aristotelian tradition towards a rather Neoplatonic framework. Cf. Antognazza, “Primary Matter”: 167-186.

10 Pasnau also mentions Eustachius a Sancto Paulo’s *Summa philosophiae quadripartite*. Cfr. Pasnau, *Metaphysical Themes*: 35.

11 “Materia igitur est expers & capax omnium formarum, eoque nomine dicitur pura potential. [...] Ita quoque materia actu suam habet essentiam, atque existetiam substantialem distinctam ab essentia atque existentia formae: quam si non haberet, non video, quomodo corporum constitutionem posset ingredi; imo quomodo posset dici capax formarum, et non potius purum nihil.” Burgersdijk, Franciscus, *Collegium physicum* (Lugd. Batavorum, 1642): 21.

For instance, in his earlier writings, Leibniz acknowledges some degree of reality to primary matter.¹² See, for example, the corollaries of the *Disputatio metaphysica de principio individui*, where he equates matter and quantity in contrast to his scholastic contemporaries.

COROLLARY

I. Matter has entitative act by itself.

II. It is not improbable that matter and quantity are really the same thing.¹³

Of course, Leibniz does not explicitly mention primary matter, but one may conclude, by the context of the passage, that he thinks that matter has an entitative act, regardless of the action of any form. Leibniz offers a more explicit mention of the entitative act of primary matter in a letter to his professor Thomasius:

For regarded in itself there is no diversity in it, but only homogeneity, except as a result of motion. Hence all the knots of the scholastic are now untied. First, they ask about its entitative actuality prior to all form. And it must be replied that it is an entity prior to all forms, since it has its own existence. For everything which is in some space exists, and this cannot be denied of this mass, even though it lacks all motion and discontinuity.¹⁴

By defending the *entitative thesis*, Leibniz adopts the side of Ockham, Scotus, and the traditions that followed them in the seventeenth century.¹⁵ In the time of the correspondence with Thomasius, Leibniz directly relates primary matter to Cartesian mass. Accordingly, it works as a mixture of Aristotelian *hypokeimenon* of change and Cartesian support for extension and impenetrability¹⁶. While it is plausible that this link between mass and primary matter would render the latter an actual being, there is at least one text in which Leibniz hesitates in this regard:

Aristotle’s primary matter is the same as Descartes’s subtle matter. Each is divisible to infinity. Each lacks form and motion in itself, each acquires forms through motion. [...] To these remarks I now add that *primary matter is nothing*

12 Cf. Nita, “Leibniz and prime matter”: 435-436.

13 *Disputatio metaphysica de principio individui*, AA VI, 1, 19.

14 Leibniz to Thomasius, April 20/30, 1669, A II, 1, 26 (L, 95).

15 See, for instance, André Dabillon, a seventeenth-century ockhamist: “Lamatiere, & la forme sont des estres reels, substantiels, qui existent actuellement dans le nature: car ce qui compse vn estre actuel, existe actuellement, ou le tout substantiel seroit composé de rien”. André Dabillon, *La physique des bons esprits, ou l'idée et abrégé d'une physique familière et solide* (Paris: Sebastien Piquet, 1643).

16 *De materia prima* (1670-1671?), A VI, 2; Leibniz to Thomasius, April 20/30, 1669, A II, 1, 26 (L, 95). The idea of primary matter as the ultimate substrate of changing properties lasts until the end of the 1670s. *Definitiones: aliquid, nihil* (1679), A VI, 4, 310.

if it is at rest. And this is what certain Scholastics said obscurely when they said that primary matter even obtains its existence from form. There is a demonstration of this. For whatever is not sensed is nothing. But that in which there is no variety is not sensed. Similarly: *If all primary matter were to move in one direction, that is, in parallel lines, it would be at rest,* and consequently would be nothing. Everything is a plenum, since primary matter and space are the same.¹⁷

At first glance, this text indicates that Leibniz is aligning with Aquina's more radical position (*strong negativity thesis*). However, it should be noted that the statement "primary matter is nothing if it is at rest" is grounded in the rather unconventional thesis: "whatever is not sensed is nothing".¹⁸ Of course, this statement does not align with the core of Aristotelian or Thomistic traditions, but it does imply that Leibniz might not deprive primary matter of an entitative act unless we are willing to admit to hardcore idealism such as in an early stage of Leibniz's work¹⁹. It would also be challenging to make sense of how a non-entitative primary matter could be equated to Cartesian matter. My opinion is that, in the early stages of Leibniz's thought,²⁰ he did not champion a strong version of the *negativity thesis*. This is corroborated by some contemporary Leibniz's excerpts and notes on authors that support the entitative thesis: Daniel Stahl, Johann Heinrich Alsted, Erhard Weigel²¹

17 *De materia prima* (1670-1671?), A VI, 2 (Arthur, 344).

18 Consider a passage with a familiar tone in Burgersdijk analysis of primary matter: "Nam corpus omne Physicum debet esse sensible, atque insuper definitae quantitatis ac figurae: at materia prima expers est omnis qualitatis" Burgersdijk, *Collegium physicum*: 20.

19 That would not be coherent with other theses in Leibniz's early metaphysics, such as the conviction of the reality of space, motion, and bodies. Cf. *De arcanis sublimium vel de summa rerum*, A VI, 3, 476-477; *De unione animae et corporis*, A VI, 3, 479-480; *Hypotheses physica nova*, A VI, 2, 223.

20 I am using the chronological division made by Garber in *Leibniz: Body, Substance, Monad* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009). According to Garber, the earlier and the mature philosophy of Leibniz are divided by the "middle years", which run roughly from the late 1670s to the mid- or late 1690s. Cf. Garber, *Leibniz: Body, Substance, Monad*: xix.

21 *De distinctionibus seu fundamentis divisionum* (1682-1696?), A VI, 4, 1147: "Entitativus quem etiam habet materia prima, vel quidditativus qui determinat. Essentiae, Existentiae qui posterior continet durationem et subsistentiam". Matter has entity, *quiditas* comes from form. Unfortunately, this fragment is not precisely dated by the editors of the *Akademie*. See also: *Universum corpus pansophicum (en Aus und zu Schriften von Erhard Weigel)* (1683), A VI 4, 1182; *Notae ad Danielelem Stahlum* (1663-1664), A, VI, 1, 26. The defense of the *entitative thesis* was not scarce during the mid-seventeenth century philosophy, although it was often supported in the context of corpuscularism. Pierre Gassendi and Isaac Beeckman, for instance, explicitly draw on Aristotelian primary matter to explain the substratum of change. Other corpuscularists (v.g., Antoine de Villon and Etienne de Clave) reject the use of the term (although they preserve its function as a substratum), stressing the discontinuity with the aristotelian tradition. Cf. Pasnau, *Metaphysical Themes*: 41. Indeed, to render corpuscularism plausible, matter should have some sort of actuality (quantity or quality) and,

It is noteworthy that the notion of primary matter is rarely present in the middle years of Leibniz’s philosophy (from the late 1670s to the mid- or late 1690s).²² A notorious exception is in a letter to Arnauld from 1687:

But if by the term matter, we understand something which is always essential to the same substance, one can mean by it, in the sense of certain Scholastics, the primitive passive power of a substance. Matter in this sense will not be extended or divisible, though it will be the principle of divisibility or that which corresponds to it in the substance. But I do not want to argue about the use of terms.

This fragment was not included in the final paper sent to Arnauld. Leibniz bracketed and omitted it in the last version of the letter. It is interesting that, even when Leibniz did not mention primary matter by name, he is acknowledging a sense of matter that is neither extended nor divisible. One may suppose that he is talking about the primary matter because there is no other concept in the Leibnizian repertoire that fits this description²³. Furthermore, we have to acknowledge that, if Leibniz is referring to of primary matter here, we are facing a turning point where primary matter ceases to be an extended mass and becomes a “principle of divisibility”. If someone is willing to ascribe the strong negativity thesis to Leibniz, he may find good evidence in this fragment. Indeed, by subtracting extension and divisibility, Leibniz can remove the entitative act that Cartesian mass necessarily implies.

In Leibniz’s later writings, primary matter receives a more thorough discussion. There, primary matter is directly related to the monad’s primitive passive power (as in the passage of the *Specimen Dynamicum* quoted at the beginning of this paper), as well as being linked to some physical properties of bodies, such as *antitypia* or impenetrability, resistance, and inertia.

In most of the texts of this period, Leibniz presents his account of primary matter in a rather positive way. See, for instance, his famous metaphysical scheme offered to De Volder in a letter of 1703:

thus, entity on its own. The Leibnizian approach is special in this regard, as he defends the *entitative thesis* of primary matter and yet, at the same time, a strong conception of forms (unlike corpuscularism).

22 Again, I am using the division proposed by Garber in Garber, *Leibniz: Body, Substance, Monad*. Interestingly, Leibniz abandoned the notion of “primary matter” precisely at the moment that Garber describes his metaphysic as some sort of Aristotelian hylomorphism.

23 Duarte proposes a similar lecture on this passage in “Leibniz and Prime Matter”: 447. Nevertheless, he thinks Leibniz is talking here about the primary matter of monads. Nevertheless, if we are to follow Garber chronology, that would be an anachronism. I would not get into the details of Garber’s hypothesis in this regard, but I would like to suggest that the way Leibniz uses the concept of primary matter through the years could shed some light on the debate of the genesis of the monadological metaphysics.

Therefore, I distinguish: (1) the primitive entelechy or soul; (2) the matter, namely, the primary matter or primitive passive power; (3) the monad made up of these two things; (4) the mass [*massa*] or secondary matter, or the organic machine in which innumerable subordinate monads come together; and (5) the animal, that is, the corporeal substance, which the dominating monad in the machine makes one.²⁴

Primary matter is presented as a co-principle that constitutes monads along with entelechy²⁵. Leibniz refers to the primary matter in terms of “*vis primitiva patiendi seu resistendi*”²⁶, “*potentia passiva primitiva*”²⁷, “*vis passiva resistendi*”²⁸. At first glance, it is difficult to admit that Leibniz embraces the *strong negativity thesis* when the notion of force is not a merely abstract term, neither for Leibniz nor for other contemporary philosophers. And thus, the problem remains: this particular force is a *passive force*, which seems to be an oxymoron. Therefore, if Leibniz is indeed arguing for the *strong negativity thesis*, this implies that a “passive force”, while being passive, is only metaphorically a “force”.

III. THE STRONG NEGATIVITY THESIS AND INERTIA

Antognazza and Duarte constructed a robust argument to defend that Leibniz is a supporter of the *strong negativity thesis*.²⁹ Going further than Aquinas, Leibniz —in Antognazza’s view— would have acknowledged (with Scotus and Suarez) that if the primary matter is pure potentiality, then it is nothing at all. But, contrary to Scotus and Suarez, Leibniz admits the consequence: primary matter is, in fact, pure non-being.

In Antognazza’s account, Leibniz closely linked primary matter, primitive passive power, and creaturely limitation. Contextual evidence of the relation

24 Leibniz to De Volder, June 20th, 1703, GP II, 252 (AG, 177).

25 See also: *De ipsa natura* (1698), G IV, 512; Leibniz to De Volder, January 9/20, 1700, G II, 206; Leibniz to Des Bosses, March 16th, 1709, G II, 368; Leibniz to Des Bosses, April 30th, 1709, GP II, 371. Another way to express that the monad is constituted by *materia prima* plus *entelechy* is to refer the lack of completeness of primary matter *per se*. In this regard, see: Leibniz to Johann Bernoulli, August 22nd / September 1st, 1698, GM III, 536-7; Leibniz to Johann Bernoulli, September 20/30, 1698, G III 541-2; Leibniz to Johann Bernoulli, November 18/28, 1698, G III, 551; Leibniz to Johann Bernoulli, December 17/27, 1698, G III, 560.

26 *Specimen dynamicum* (1695), GM VI, 236.

27 De Volder, June 20th, 1703, GP II, 252.

28 *De ipse natura* (1698), G IV, 510.

29 Cf. Antognazza, “Primary Matter”: 167-186; Duarte, “Leibniz and Prime Matter”: 435-460.

between the first two concepts is provided above. Antognazza uses two excerpts from the *Essais de Theodicée* and one from *Causa Dei* to show the close relationship between primary matter and power limitation³⁰. She demonstrates this connection through the notion of inertia:

The celebrated Kepler and M. Descartes (in his letters) after him have spoken of the 'natural inertia of bodies'; and it is something which may be regarded as a perfect image and even as a sample of the original limitation of creatures, to show that privation constitutes the formal character of the imperfections and disadvantages that are in substance as well as in its actions. Let us suppose that the current of one and the same river carried along with it various boats, which differ among themselves only in the cargo, some being laden with wood, others with stone, and some more, the others less.

That being so, it will come about that the boats most heavily laden will go more slowly than the others, provided it be assumed that the wind or the oar, or some other similar means, assist them not at all. It is not, properly speaking, weight which is the cause of this retardation, since the boats are going down and not upwards. [...] It is therefore matter itself which originally is inclined to slowness or privation of speed; not indeed of itself to lessen this speed, having once received it, since that would be action, but to moderate by its receptivity the effect of the impression when it is to receive it.³¹

Leibniz presents an analogy of the current of a river and the load of a boat, and the action of God and the imperfection of creatures. The inertia described by Kepler, i.e., the resistance to motion, is paired with the limited capacity of creatures to receive God's action. In this passage, Leibniz intends to absolve God for the evil of the created world. He is not the formal cause of sins in the same way that the river's current is not the cause of the stagnation of the loaded

30 *Essais de Theodicée*, §30, GP VI, 119-120; "Abregé de la Controverse reduite à des Argumens en forme", GP VI, 383; *Causa Dei*, §§ 69-73; GP VI, 449-450.

31 *Essais de Theodicée*, §30, GP VI, 119-120 (Huggard, 140). Antognazza proposes some changes to Huggard's translation. She translates the last sentences as: "It is therefore matter itself which originally is inclined to slowness or privation of speed; *not indeed through the lessening of this speed*, once it has already received it, since that would be acting, *but through moderating by its receptivity the effect of the impression*, when it is to receive it" Antognazza, "Primary Matter": 178. The original text says: "C'est donc que la matiere est portée originairement à la tardivité ou à la privation de la vitesse; *non pas pour la diminuer par soy même*, quand elle a déjà reçu cette vitesse, car ce seroit agir, *mais pour moderer par sa receptivité l'effect de l'impression*, quand elle le doit recevoir" (emphasis added in both cases). I do not see any reason to prefer Antognazza's rather than Huggard's. In fact, in seventeenth-century French, the construction "pour+infinitive" can be read as "en tant que" or "as long as", which would make more sense in this context. This meaning, though scarcely, is preserved in current French. Cf. *Tresor de la langue française*. <http://stella.atilf.fr/Dendien/scripts/tlfiv5/visusel.exe?12;s=167158110;r=1;nat=;sol=3>

boats. God is the cause of perfection; imperfection comes from the limited receptivity of creatures. Since the main purpose of the paragraph is not to say something about inertia but to explain how God's power and benevolence are not diminished by the existence of evil, one might read this passage as a mere didactic metaphor used by Leibniz. Nevertheless, Antognazza proposes a stronger interpretation of the analogy. For her, this primitive passivity from which inertia results is the expression of the imperfection and limitation of creatures:

I would therefore venture to say that Leibniz's notion of primary matter is, at bottom, nothing else than his notion of creaturely limitation. For Leibniz, the notion of primary matter expresses the fact that creatures qua limited and imperfect beings have an intrinsic passivity, from which features of bodies such as impenetrability, resistance and inertia ultimately result.³²

Antognazza ascribes the *strong negativity thesis* to Leibniz by rooting his notion of inertia in the imperfection of creatures. Her insight on the *Theodicy* excerpt is that it is not a mere metaphor but, as Leibniz himself says, a sample or "*echantillon*" of the effect of creaturely limitation. If inertia is an effect of primary matter (and Leibniz says this in many texts³³), and inertia is also an effect of the imperfection of creatures (as seems to be stated in the *Theodicy*), then the primary matter is a way to express the negativity of created substances: their imperfection.

Antognazza's view receives additional support when considering the reference to Augustin in the text. She advocates for a Neoplatonic consideration of the primary matter on Leibniz's behalf. I strongly agree with this interpretation since there were no late Aristotelian supporters of the strong negativity thesis³⁴. Moreover, in some notes on Augustin's *Confessions*, Leibniz seems to ascribe him a negative comprehension of primary matter:

Saint Augustine himself nicely explains this spiritual substance or primitive form that, as well as primary matter, does not exist like the things, secondary matters, or secondary forms, although these are prior in respect to the origin (lib.12 c.29), for, in fact, primary matter would never exist without any form.³⁵

32 Cf. Antognazza, "Primary Matter": 179.

33 Leibniz to Thomas Burnett, February, 1700, A I, 18, 376; *Specimen dynamicum* (1695), GM VI, 236 (AG, 119-120).

34 Cf. Pasnau, *Metaphysical Themes*: 37.

35 *De rerum creatione sententiae* (*En Aus und zu Augustinus Confessiones*) (1677), A VI 4, 1686.

While Leibniz ascribes to Augustin the *soft negativity thesis*³⁶, it is reasonable to think that there might be a connection between a negative understanding of primary matter and the definition of evil as a privation of good. This connection grants Leibniz the opportunity to make the analogy offered in the *Theodicy*.

If Leibniz is championing the *strong negativity thesis* regarding the primary matter, and the primary matter is equated with primitive passive force, then primitive passive force will no longer be an oxymoron nor a contradiction in Leibniz’s system.

IV. THE PROBLEM WITH INERTIA

It seems obvious from this analysis that the notion of inertia plays a major role in the interpretation of primary matter. Since Leibniz often suggests that inertia is connected to primary matter or primitive passive force, and since the *strong negativity thesis* states that primary matter is a mere non-being, then inertia, as an effect of primary matter, should also be regarded as a purely fictitious force³⁷. I would like to address, nonetheless, some complications that arise from the notion of inertia that should be taken into consideration before embracing the *strong negativity thesis*.

Firstly, it does not seem conclusive that Leibniz intended something more than a mere metaphor in the three passages quoted by Antognazza. Leibniz indeed uses the expression “*echantillon*”, which might be understood as “not only an image, but as a sample”. This expression invites us to take a literal reading of the analogy, since inertia is –allegedly– an instance of the original imperfection of creatures. Nonetheless, another passage of the *Theodicy* may contribute to a non-literal interpretation of the analogy of the river:

Kepler, one of the most excellent of modern mathematicians, recognized a species of imperfection in matter, even when there is no irregular motion: he calls

36 In fact, it seems to me that Augustine is defending in *Conf.* XII, ch. XXIX the soft negativity thesis: “The fact is that the song is a formed sound, and a thing can certainly exist without being formed, but, a thing that does not exist cannot be formed. Thus, material is prior to that which is made from it, not prior in the sense that it produces it actively, for its part here is passive instead, nor prior by a period of time. For, we do not emit formless sounds in prior time, without the song, and then arrange and fashion them into the form of a song in a later period of time, as wood is used in making a box, or silver is fashioning a dish.” Saint Augustine. *Confessions*, (Washington, D.C.: Catholic University of America Press, 1953).

37 This idea is suggested in Duarte, “Leibniz and Prime Matter”: 455; and strongly defended by Antognazza, “Primary Matter”: 181.

it its ‘natural inertia’, which gives it a resistance to motion, whereby a greater mass receives less speed from one and the same force. There is soundness in this observation, and I have used it to advantage in this work, in order to have a comparison such as should illustrate how the original imperfection of the creatures sets bounds to the action of the Creator, which tends towards good. But as matter is itself of God’s creation, *it only furnishes a comparison and an example, and cannot be the very source of evil and of imperfection.*³⁸

Of course, Leibniz is not rejecting the *strong negativity thesis*. He attempts to avoid the conclusion that matter is the source of imperfection, which does not affect Antognazza’s claim. Nevertheless, it diminishes our confidence in the literality of the boats’ metaphor. Leibniz is “illustrating” with a “comparison” and an “example,” but he is unwilling to link inertia and creaturely imperfection directly.

Secondly, there is the problem that inertia is a problematic notion in Leibniz’s system. The reference to Kepler is pretty meaningful in the context of early eighteenth-century mechanics. By the time Leibniz wrote the *Theodicy*, Kepler’s account of inertia was obsolete, as it was confronted with the advances made by Descartes, Newton, and Leibniz himself. As Leibniz explicitly addresses, Kepler’s inertia is a tendency to rest and not a tendency to preserve the state of motion *or* rest, as Descartes or Newton proposed³⁹. Newton himself referred to Kepler in a handwritten note in his personal copy of the second edition of the *Principia Mathematica*, though it wasn’t published in the third edition:

I do not mean Kepler’s force of inertia, by which bodies tend toward rest, but a force of remaining in the same state either of resting or of moving.⁴⁰

Descartes’ *Principia philosophiae* also states that inertia is a tendency to preserve the state of movement *or* rest. In his “Laws of Motion” he clearly says:

The first law of nature: each and every thing, in so far as it can, always continues in the same state [...] The second law of nature: all motion is in itself rectilinear; and hence anybody moving in a circle always tends to move away from the centre of the circle which it describes...⁴¹

38 *Essais de Theodicée*, §380, GP VI, 341 (Huggard, 353) (*emphasis added*).

39 “Habet [globus coelestis] tamen ratione suae materiae naturalem *adynamian* transeundi de loco in locum, habet naturalem inertiam seu quietem, qua qui’escit in omni loco, vbi solitarius collocatur”. Johannes Kepler, *Gesammelte Werke*, Vol. VII, ed. M. Caspar and W. von Dyck (München, 1991): 296.

40 Bernstein, following Cohen, points out that the reference to Kepler will be later changed to “alliquorum,” probably in reference to Leibniz. Cf. Howard R. Bernstein, “Passivity and Inertia in Leibniz’s Dynamics,” *Studia Leibnitiana* 13, no. 1 (1981): 97-113.

41 *Principia philosophiae*, II, §§37, 39, AT VIII, 62-63 (Cottingham I, 241).

In this sense, the reference to “Kepler and M. Descartes” made by Leibniz in the *Theodicy* might appear surprising since both authors have different opinions on this matter. It is easy to find textual evidence that Leibniz was aware and in agreement with Descartes’ notion of inertia in *Principia philosophiae*,⁴² and yet, Leibniz refers to Cartesian letters instead, where he talked about inertia in more Keplerian terms. In these letters, Descartes even mentioned the same example of the loaded boats that Leibniz uses on his behalf later on.⁴³ Bernstein thoroughly proves that Leibniz has a clear idea that there is a “conserving force” that should apply to both rest and motion, even in his earlier writings on physics. A passage from *Theoria motus abstracti* provides strong evidence in this regard:

(8) For where a thing is once at rest, it will always remain at rest unless a new cause of motion occurs. (9) Conversely, a thing once moved will always move with the same velocity and in the same direction if left to itself.⁴⁴

The conviction about this “conserving force” or the tendency of bodies to preserve their state of motion or rest will last through all of Leibniz’s life⁴⁵. We can see some mentions of it in *Tentamen de motuum coelestium causis* (1689) and *De ipsa natura* (1698)⁴⁶. Indeed, it would make no sense to presume that Leibniz—who notably mastered and developed the mechanics of his time—would not have grasped the difference between Keplerian and Newtonian (or Cartesian) notions of inertia.

The problem is that Leibniz never used the term “inertia” to describe this conserving force in relation to the *preservation of motion*. He only uses it to describe the tendency to *preserve rest*. I will not go into the details of why Leibniz

42 “Ad artic. (40 usque ad 44). Duas Naturae Leges verissimas attulit Cartesius artic. 37 et 39, et sua quadam luce claras”. *Animadversiones in partem generalem Principio Cartesianorum*, GP IV, 373.

43 “Et pour ce que, si deux corps inégaux reçoivent autant de mouvement l’un que l’autre, cette pareille quantité de mouvement ne donne pas tant de vitesse au plus grand qu’au plus petit, on peut dire, en ce sens, que plus vn corps contient de matière, plus il a d’Inertie Naturelle”. Descartes to Mersenne, April 30th, 1639, AT II, 543-544. In an earlier letter, Descartes refuse to recognize something as a “Inertie ou tardiveté naturelle dans les corps”. Although he concedes that “les plus grands corps, estant poussez par vne mesme force, comme les plus grands bateaux par vn mesme vent, se meuvent tousjours plus lentement que les autres; ce qui seroit peut-estre assez pour établir ses raisons, sans auoir recours à cette Inertie naturelle qui ne peut aucunement estre prouuée”. Descartes to Mersenne, December 5th, 1638, AT II, 466-467.

44 *Theoria motus abstracti* (1670-71?), A VI, 2, 265 (L, 140). Bernstein also gives evidence from the letter from Leibniz to Oldenburg, March 11th, 1671. Howard R. Bernstein, “Passivity and Inertia in Leibniz’s Dynamics,” *Studia Leibnitiana* 13, no. 1 (1981): note 17.

45 I take the term of “conserving force” (*vis conservans*) from Bernstein, “Passivity”: 97-113. In turn, he borrows it from E. McMullin, *Newton on Matter & Activity* (Indiana: University of Notre Dame Press, 1977): 5-27, 61-2.

46 *Tentamen motuum coelestium causis* (1689), GM VI, 149; *De ipsa natura* (1698), GM IV, 510-511.

uses this particular terminology,⁴⁷ but I would like to point out that this fact might support Antognazza's case. Indeed, if the term "inertia" is preserved merely to designate the tendency to rest, it would easily line up with primary matter and creaturely limitation. Accordingly, this "conserving force" would be twofold: it would have a negative, passive, primary matter-related aspect (called inertia); and a positive, active, entelechy-related aspect (with no particular term attached to it). The most significant text to support this view might be the following from *De ipsa natura* (1689). There, after the usual reference to Kepler, Leibniz says:

Hence it is in this very passive force of resisting (which includes impenetrability and something more) that I locate the notion of primary matter or bulk [*moles*], which is everywhere the same in a body and proportional to its size, and I show that from this follow laws of motion far different than they would be if only impenetrability and extension were in bodies and their matter. *And just as there is natural inertia opposed to motion in matter, so too in body itself, indeed in all substance, there is a natural constancy opposed to change.* Indeed, this doctrine does not support, but rather opposes those who deny activity [*actio*] to things. For, as certain as it is that matter cannot initiate motion through itself, it is just as certain that a body conceived in and of itself retains an impetus once it is imparted, and remains constant in its mobility [*levitas*], that is, it has the tendency to persevere in that series of its changes, which it has once entered upon, as admirable experiments on motion impressed by a mover in motion also show. *And since these activities and entelechies certainly cannot be modifications of primary matter or bulk [moles], something essentially passive, as the most judicious Sturm has clearly acknowledged (how he did this we shall discuss in the following paragraph), we must judge even from this that a first entelechy must be found in corporeal substance, a first subject of activity, namely a primitive motive force which, added over and above extension (or that which is merely geometrical), and over and above bulk (or that which is merely material), always acts but yet is modified in various ways in the collision of bodies through conatus and impetus.*⁴⁸

In this passage, we can find the notion of inertia related to primary matter and the more general formulation of the "conserving force" ("natural constancy opposed to change") related to entelechies. This division would completely separate inertia from active forces and, thus, Antognazza's hypothesis that Leibniz's inertia is not an actual force becomes more plausible. Nevertheless,

47 On this, see Bernstein, "Passivity": 97-113.

48 *De ipsa natura* (1698), G IV, 510-511 (AG, 161-162) (emphasis added).

there are some other features in the notion of inertia that would prevent us from reaching such a quick conclusion.

Foremost, proposing a rigid division between inertia and the conserving force would violate some critical Leibnizian theses. For instance, Leibniz is a devout supporter of the “equivalence of hypotheses”⁴⁹. To ask for a clear distinction between inertia as a tendency to rest and conserving force as a tendency to preserve rectilinear uniform motion is to violate this principle of the equivalence of hypotheses. Indeed, the equivalence of hypotheses allowed a broader comprehension of inertia: the inclination to preserve motion is equal to the inclination to preserve rest because uniform rectilinear motion and rest are dynamically equivalent. For Leibniz, this equivalence is not a mere phenomenal or physical fact. Instead, it is a metaphysical condition rooted in his monadological philosophy and his concept of space. Criticism of absolute space and defense of relational space is a complex issue in Leibniz’s metaphysics, and this is not the place to deepen on this topic; notwithstanding, we can safely state that it would be incorrect to assume “absolute rest” as an ontologically meaningful concept in his philosophy. One may object that Leibniz has a relativistic notion of motion only at the physical level, but that he advocates for a clear differentiation between activity and passivity at the metaphysical level. That is, in fact, the case: there are plenty of passages where Leibniz refers to the absolute causes of motion while admitting the relativity of motion⁵⁰. Nevertheless, absolute motion at the metaphysical level only refers to the *causes* of motion, while conservative forces are at the phenomenal level.

Secondly, Leibniz usually connects entelechy with derivative forces expressed in the collision of bodies. Primary matter is, on the other hand, connected to conservative force, resisting primitive force, and inertia. Nonetheless, even assuming the cartesian definition of conservative forces,

49 “That is, if we keep the appearances in the given phenomena constant, then whatever the true hypothesis might finally be, to whichever body we might in the end truly ascribe motion or rest, the same outcome would be found in the phenomena in question, that is, the same outcome would be found in the resulting phenomena, even as regards the action of bodies on one another”. *Specimen Dynamicum II* (1695), GM VI, 248 (AG, 131).

50 Cf. *Animadversiones in partem generalem...*, G IV, 369; *Specimen dynamicum II*, GM VI, 248; *Dynamica de potentia II*, secc. 3, prop. 19, GM VI, 507-508; *De causa gravitatis...*, GM VI, 202; Leibniz a Arnauld, 30 de abril de 1687, A II, 2, 177-178; Leibniz a Arnauld, 9 de octubre de 1687, A II, 2, 242-243. On this issue, cf. Anja Jauering, “Leibniz on Motion and the Equivalence of Hypothesis”, *The Leibniz Review* 18 (2008): 14.

Leibniz uses the term “inertia” in a Keplerian, rather than a Cartesian sense, i.e. to denote the tendency to rest.⁵¹

However, even when considering this constrained formulation of inertia, Leibniz is advocating for a definition of inertia as a real force. The current conception of inertia as a fictitious force that arises when describing a mass using a non-inertial frame of reference was not available until the eighteenth century, and, as such, it is unlikely that Leibniz would have proposed such an avant-garde position.⁵² It is likewise dubious that Leibniz proposed inertia as a mere phenomenal effect of creature finitude, as implied in the passage from the *Theodicy*. Then, a proper account of primary matter should provide a) an explanation of how primary matter relates to creature limitation; b) how it relates to inertia as a non-fictitious force; c) how this could be made consistent with the strong negativity thesis of Aquinas’s tradition.

V. PRIMARY MATTER AS CREATURE LIMITATION

It is clear by now that, in his mature metaphysics, Leibniz abandoned his former support of the *entitative thesis* in favor of some version of the *negativity thesis*. The scholastic question of whether primary matter can exist without any form is not a relevant issue in Leibniz’s monadology (accordingly, a distinction between *soft* and *strong negativity thesis* is not meaningful). Once substances are defined as monads, and monads are regarded as entelechies, it is obvious that there is no “formless prime matter” in Leibniz’s ontological repertoire, not as a natural being, nor as a product of any supernatural intervention.

Leibniz discussed this issue with Bernoulli in a series of letters from 1698. The conversation starts with a strong denial of the *entitative thesis* by Leibniz: “Matter itself or mole, what can be called primary matter, is not a substance, nor an aggregate of substances, but something incomplete. Secondary matter or mass is not substance, but substances”.⁵³ In his answer, Bernoulli confessed some perplexity and asks for clarification. Leibniz’s reformulate his view in terms of passivity:

51 Cf. Domenico Bertoloni Meli, *Equivalence and Priority. Newton versus Leibniz* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993), 31.

52 Cf. Meli, *Equivalence*: 29, note 17.

53 Leibniz to Johann Bernoulli, August 22th / September 1st, 1698 GM III, 536-7. Other passages with a straightforward denial of the *entitative thesis* may be found in: Leibniz to De Volder, July 6th, 1701, G II, 225.

You ask 1st: What do I understand by matter itself or primary matter or mole as different from secondary matter? I answer: that which is merely passive and separated from souls or forms.⁵⁴

You ask 2nd: What is “incomplete” to me? I answer: passive without active, active without passive.⁵⁵

In a subsequent letter, Leibniz equated activity and entelechy, on one hand, and passivity and matter on the other hand.

When I said that primary matter is that which is merely passive and separated from souls or forms, I said the same thing twice; that is to say, that it is merely passive and separated from all activity. Indeed, forms are nothing more than activities or entelechies; and substantial forms are primitive entelechies.⁵⁶

The immediate consequence of this equation is that there are no entelechies without primary matter because that would imply pure activity, a characterization that can be only attributed to God⁵⁷. Bernoulli questions whether angels are not pure forms, to which Leibniz answers, by quoting the Church Fathers, that even angels have primary matter⁵⁸. So the scholastic *soft negativity thesis*, which states that there is no primary matter without a form, is subverted here in a peculiar reformulation: no finite form is ever found without primary matter.

In this sense, Antognazza rightly states that, for Leibniz, limitation and primary matter are closely related; for limited creatures, and only them, have primary matter as a blueprint of their finitude. Since inertia is an effect of primary matter, it is also linked to imperfection and limitation:

Inertia and resistance are derivative features in bodies of the primitive passivity which is an aspect of all created substances due to the necessary imperfection and limitation of creatures qua creatures. Their limitation is nothing else than an instance of non-being.⁵⁹

Accordingly, the primary matter should be understood under the scope of the *strong negativity thesis*. Primary matter does not exist in itself since it is an instance of a lack of existence. Nevertheless, as I have proved above, this falls

54 Leibniz to Johann Bernoulli, September 20th/30th, 1698, G III, 541-2.

55 Leibniz to Johann Bernoulli, September 20th/30th, 1698, G III, 541-2.

56 Leibniz to Bernoulli, November 18th / 28th, 1698, G III, 551.

57 See also Leibniz to Des Bosses, October 16th, 1706, G II, 324 (Lodge, 79).

58 Cf. Leibniz to Bernoulli, December 17th / 27th, 1698, G III, 560. For Leibniz, angels have primary matter, though not necessarily secondary matter, and an organic body, cf. Leibniz to Des Bosses, October 16th, 1706, G II, 324 (Lodge, 79).

59 Antognazza, “Primary Matter”: 179.

in contradiction with the notion of resistance and inertia as positive forces, since they should be considered an effect of non-being.

I would like to stress the importance of the notion of “limitation” in this context. Certainly, this is a term that Leibniz uses as a synonym for finitude:

42. It also follows that creatures receive their perfections from the influence of God but that their imperfections are due to their own nature, which is incapable of being limitless. For it is in this that they differ from God.⁶⁰

Nevertheless, Leibniz also uses “limitation” in connection with “modification” and “variation”.⁶¹ “Modification” is a very obscure notion as well; although, both terms seem to be used as metaphors extracted from geometry. Leibniz himself points out this analogy in some passages.⁶² Both, “modification” and “limitation”, are used to describe the relationship between primitive and passive force.

Otherwise each monad would be a divinity. It is not in the object but in the modification of their knowledge of the object that the monads are limited. They all move confusedly toward the infinite, toward the whole, but they are limited and distinguished from each other by the degrees of their distinct perceptions.⁶³

This implies that “limitation” is not only a synonym for “finitude” in absolute terms; it is rather a *relative* or *respective* notion. “Limitation” implies a “position” in the whole universe⁶⁴. This position is the *point de vue* of the monad, i.e., its perspective. The result of that limitation is derivative force, which is expressed in phenomena such as the collision of bodies.⁶⁵ The passive aspect of collision is resistance and inertia (derived from primary matter); the active aspect of collision is *vis viva* (derived from entelechy). Both derivative forces—passive and active—are a consequence of the limitation of primary forces.

Moreover, through derivative force, primitive force is altered [*variatur*] in the collisions of bodies, namely, in accordance with whether the exercise of primitive force is turned inward or outward.⁶⁶

60 *Monadologie*, 42, G VI, 613 (L 647).

61 *Nullum quidem librum...*, G IV, 397.

62 Cfr. Leibniz to Wolff, s/f, LW, 130; Leibniz to Bernoulli, November, 18th [28th], 1698, GM III, 552; *Nullum quidem librum...*, G IV, 397.

63 *Monadologie*, 60, G VI, 617 (L 649).

64 This “position” is also a metaphorical term since Leibnizian monads are not distributed in space. Instead, the extension of phenomena results from monads. Cf. Leonardo Ruiz-Gómez, *El concepto leibniziano de espacio. La polémica con Clarke y el newtonianismo* (Pamplona: EUNSA, 2014): chapter 4.

65 Leonardo Ruiz-Gómez, “Fuerza primitiva y fuerza derivativa en G.W. Leibniz: modificación y limitación”, *Tópicos* 48 (2015): 141-168.

66 *Nullum quidem librum*, G IV, 397 (AG, 254).

This understanding of the notion of "limitation" demands an amendment to the *strong negative thesis* and Antongazza's case. Indeed, primary matter is related to creaturely limitation. But the main purpose of distinguishing between active and passive forces is not to denote limitation and finitude, but passivity and activity. Again, Antognazza is correct in pointing out that pure activity equals perfection in Leibniz's thought, and thus, imperfection implies passivity. However, it is the expression between monads, and not passivity, where one may find the roots of limitation or modification of entelechies.

It is true that, for Leibniz, primary matter is a "way to describe limitation".⁶⁷ Nevertheless, "limitation" is not only an "instance of non-being", since, in that case, it would not sufficiently explain the positive features of derivative forces.⁶⁸ The term also designates the modification of substances through expression at the monadological level and through collision at the phenomenal level.

52. It is in this way that actions and passions are mutual among creatures. For God, comparing two simple substances, finds the reasons in each which oblige him to adapt the other to it, with the result that whatever is active in certain respects is passive considered from another point - active insofar as what we distinctly know in it serves as a reason for what happens in another, but passive insofar as the reason for what happens in it is found in what we know distinctly in another.⁶⁹

67 Cfr. Antognazza, "Primary Matter": 185.

68 One blind referee kindly pointed out that my objections to Antognazza's account dismiss a central feature of Leibniz's philosophy, namely, the "gap problem": "In short: how is it possible to explain the connection between radically heterogeneous entities (such as simple monads and the bodily realm)?" The referee argues that, in attempting to save some positivity in primary matter, I would be neglecting the radical difference between the realm of monads and phenomena: "For example, using the author's strategy, one could argue that monads must be material, for, otherwise, how could they relate to material bodies?" I argue that this "gap" problem should be reconsidered in light of Leibniz's philosophy of expression. I'm afraid I won't be able to thoroughly explain here his theory of expression, but I'd like to emphasize a feature that can be useful for the "gap" problem. Sets of individuals express each other when they preserve some kind of structure between their elements even when there is no shared property between the individuals of one set and those of the other. In this sense, monads and phenomena indeed share no properties, however, they express each other. So, although the "gap" problem is not avoided, there are some features of one set that can be explained in terms of the other set. Similarly, there is no shared property between primary matter and inertia or any other phenomenal feature (as suggested by the referee). Yet, there are relations between primary matter and entelechy that should mirror the relation between active and passive forces in phenomena. That cannot be done if we consider primary matter as mere non-being. For, if primary forces are understood as mere negativity, the pair of derivative forces (active and passive) would not mirror the pair primitive forces (active and passive).

69 *Monadologie*, 52, G VI, 615 (L, 648).

VI. CONCLUSION

Leibniz used the term “primary matter” throughout most of his entire intellectual life. In his later metaphysics, he vindicates the scholastic notions of “entelechy” and “primary matter” as fundamental parts of his monadological system.

During the early period of his philosophy, he seemed to advocate for an *entitative thesis* in regards to primary matter, as he thought of it as some sort of extended-cartesian-substratum. In this sense, he joined the scholastic tradition that argues that, if primary matter had no actuality at all, it would be nothing. Accordingly, it should have some sort of entity to explain its existence (*entitative thesis*).

In the so-called middle years, Leibniz stopped using the term “primary matter” except in a draft copy of a letter to Arnauld. There seems to be a turning point in Leibniz’s understanding of primary matter. From this moment onwards, it stopped being extended and becomes some sort of principle. This idea evolved until primary matter became the primitive passive force of the monad: the monadological source of inertia, resistance, and passivity.

Antognazza has argued that Leibniz embraces a radical version of the *negativity thesis* by admitting one premise of the *entitative thesis*: If the primary matter has no actuality at all, it would be nothing. The primary matter is pure potentiality; therefore it lacks any reality. I have shown that this is not an adequate interpretation of primary matter, since it fails to explain the positive aspects of derivative forces that are rooted in it. Although the primary matter is closely related to the limitation of monads, this does not mean that the term designates merely a lack of existence. Instead, it refers to the expression between monads and the point of view that determines their identity.

It remains to be explained how this account relates to the *strong negativity thesis* of the scholastic tradition. In my opinion, by connecting primary matter to passive forces, Leibniz was making a reformulation of the *negativity thesis* problem: in his mind, primary matter without a form is impossible, but, at the same time, also a finite entelechy without matter. Since pure passivity (i.e. primary matter) cannot exist by itself, Leibniz is a modern supporter of the *strong negativity thesis*. Nevertheless, as far as he commits to the connection between inertia and primary matter, it is not possible to understand the latter as a mere no-being. In this sense, his position is not too far from what we might think as the paradoxical opinion of Aquinas, for whom primary matter is deployed of any activity, but, at the same time, is a “real” principle of natural beings.

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