

## WIGGINS' HIDDEN PRINCIPLE OF INDIVIDUATION\*

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In his book *Sameness and Substance* (SS) Professor David Wiggins defends an interesting metaphysical theory of an Aristotelian-Leibnizian sort. His aim in the book is—as he puts it—“to propose and elaborate a theory of the individuation of continuants, both living substances and other substances”.<sup>1</sup> The problem of individuation is one of the great problems of metaphysics and it has appeared under many different guises in the history of philosophy. Within the context of an hylemorphic metaphysics, however, it presents special peculiarities. Since Wiggins avowedly adopts an Aristotelian substantialist framework, it would seem reasonable to expect a treatment of the problem in a way congruent with such peculiarities. That is the reason why it is shocking and surprising to read in the *Preamble* that

That which individuates, in the sense in which the word will be used in this book, is in the first instance a thinker, and derivately a substantive or predicate.<sup>2</sup>

Or to find, in some places,<sup>3</sup> that a concept is something that “individuates”. Wiggins is free to use the terms ‘individuate’ or ‘principle of individuation’ in any way he likes, but the use he makes in his book of these terms is confusing and unfortunate, because they have traditionally been used, in a different sense, within the context of the very same philosophy

\* This present work is dedicated to Genoveva Martí.

<sup>1</sup> SS, p. 1.

<sup>2</sup> SS, p. 5.

<sup>3</sup> Cf. SS, p. 25.

that Wiggins is trying to defend. Let me use the term 'individuation<sub>1</sub>' to express this traditional sense and reserve 'individuation<sub>2</sub>' to express the sense adopted by Wiggins. Thus, to individuate<sub>1</sub> is to make something to be individual, while to individuate<sub>2</sub> is rather "single out" or "pick out" something<sup>4</sup> which already is individual. Naturally, the first question that appears then is whether there is any connection between individuation<sub>1</sub> and individuation<sub>2</sub>. Is individuation<sub>2</sub> being used in a sense derived from or analogous to individuation<sub>1</sub>? In any case, since the problem of individuation<sub>1</sub> is unavoidable within the framework of an Aristotelian conception of substance, what is the solution to that problem actually adopted by Wiggins? These are the questions that I intend to address in the present discussion.

### 1. *Wiggins and the Traditional Problem*

There are four fundamental questions that can be raised in connection with the problem of individuation<sup>5</sup> within the framework of an Aristotelian conception of substance. The first concerns the nature of individuality and the second question is about its extension, *i.e.* about which really existing things are individual. The third question has to do with the ontological status of individuality and can be formulated in terms of two issues: (i) whether there is some distinction in reality which corresponds to the distinction in thought between the individual and its nature and (ii) what is the basis of that distinction (if any). Finally, the fourth question asks for the source or principle which makes individual beings to be individual, *i.e.* it asks for the *principle of individuation*.<sup>6</sup> Now, I want to stress that the former questions arise in a *completely objective* way within the framework of a doctrine of substance of an Aristotelian type, like the one adopted by Wiggins in his book, and that is precisely the reason why a

<sup>4</sup> SS, p. 5.

<sup>5</sup> From now on, 'individuation' must be taken in the sense of 'individuation<sub>1</sub>'.

<sup>6</sup> Cf. Gracia (1982), p. 2.

philosopher like Wiggins is *obliged* to adopt some answers to such questions. Nevertheless, Wiggins is not explicit in his views on individuation. He never defines the concept of individual and never specifies explicitly the categories of things that he takes as individuals. Nonetheless, and not quite surprisingly, we can gather that his concept of individual is similar (or identical) to the Aristotelian one, because he takes as his paradigmatic examples of individuals precisely the living beings, which, according to the Philosopher, are the individual unities *par excellence*.<sup>7</sup>

The problem is, therefore, to determine Wiggins' answers to questions three and four. Indeed, Wiggins almost never addresses these questions explicitly and that may be a signal that Wiggins considers that there is no problem of individuation. Now, this counts as positive evidence in favor of the view that Wiggins has already adopted a *position* with respect to that problem (when I said that the problem of individuation is unavoidable within the framework of an Aristotelian conception of substance, I meant that any philosopher who adopts this framework must adopt a position with respect to the same problem). It is possible to detect that position if we keep in mind the metaphysical assumption that generates the problem of individuation. This is precisely the assumption that there is a universal (or common) component in the hylemorphic compound or *σύνολον*. Clearly, if there is a universal component in the individual substance, then there must necessarily be a component or principle by virtue of which the universal is "contracted" to this individual. The problem of isolating that principle and explaining the way in which it contracts the universal to the thing is nothing else than a joint formulation of problems three and four above. Therefore, a sensible philosopher who thinks —within the present metaphysical context— that there is no such a thing as a problem of individuation must be thinking that there is nothing to contract in the individual substance. And there is more evidence that Wiggins thinks that there is no individuation

<sup>7</sup> SS, p. 98.

problem. I will try to present this evidence in a systematic way in what follows.

To begin with, Wiggins rejects two candidates for principle of individuation, namely, the Identity of Indiscernibles and the Scotist *haecceitas*. Thus, in Chapter Two, § 2, he rejects the first principle on the ground that it precludes the possibility of symmetric bodies, while in Chapter Four, § 7, he rejects the idea of individual essences, *i.e.* of intrinsic predicates that cannot be true of more than one being.<sup>8</sup> I am not concerned here with the strength or soundness of such arguments, but the fact that Wiggins takes them to establish their conclusions proves that Wiggins could not adopt as a principle of individuation anything besides the next three candidates: the matter, the form, the existence of the substance. In point of actual fact, however, in what is perhaps his only explicit declaration in this respect, Wiggins says that he adopts *the form as principium individuationis*, for he says, in connection with a passage taken from Hobbes' *De Corpore* where the philosopher of Malmesbury criticizes the view that the "unity of form" is a principle of individuation, that "the unity of form theory that Hobbes means to attack here is not dissimilar from ours".<sup>9</sup> This doctrine of individuation (I mean some version of this doctrine) was maintained by the Aristotelian Leibniz in *On Transubstantiation*, a paper written about 1668, where he says:

In Aristotle, nature is the principle of motion and rest. But substantial form is properly nature in the same philosopher. Hence Averroes, Angelus Mercenarius, and Jacob Zabarella also assert that substantial form is the principle of individuation [...] I demonstrate the numerical identity of substance from the numerical identity of substantial form, in conformity with the principles of the noblest Scholastic and Aristotelian philosophers, those

<sup>8</sup> SS, pp. 55-57, 120 and 125 (second paragraph).

<sup>9</sup> SS, p. 92. See also T. Hobbes, *The English Works*, v. I, pp. 135-138 and pp. 117-118.

for whom substantial form is the principle of individuation.<sup>10</sup>

The view that substantial form is the principle of individuation is akin to the view that the “whole entity” (*tota entitate*) is such principle. As Francisco Suárez puts it, the first view

is quite defensible, and comes very close to the truth. Strictly (*simpliciter*), however, it must be said that form alone is not the full and adequate principle of individuation of material things, if we speak of their whole entity, although it may be the principal one, and thus, according to the formal manner of speaking, it is sometimes judged sufficient for the denomination of the same individual.<sup>11</sup>

The view that the whole entity is his own principle of individuation was defended by Leibniz in his *Disputatio Metaphysica de Principio Individui* (1663), where he says that the arguments against this view “*pauca sunt et parvi momenti*”.<sup>12</sup> Wiggins explicitly acknowledges the influence of this *Disputatio* in his book<sup>13</sup> and so there is not the slightest doubt that he is well aware of the views involved. Wiggins also acknowledges that influence in some other parts of the text like page 72, where he alludes to “the speculative tradition to which the individuation theory presented here belongs”. Which tradition is this? It is clear that it must be the Aristotelian-Leibnizian tradition that he mentions in page 54, where he says that in an ordinary case, where a question of identity is in fact decidable,

we shall expect the particular criterion—or the account of what is at issue— appropriately extracted from the

<sup>10</sup> Loemker (1969), p. 117.

<sup>11</sup> *Disputatio* V, *Sectio* IV, §7; Gracia (1982), p. 109.

<sup>12</sup> Gerhardt IV, p. 20.

<sup>13</sup> See the note to the Bibliography on p. 225 and the entry on Leibniz in p. 227.

answer to the 'what is it?' question, to lead us back to what was intended by all the pre-Fregean philosophers (scholastics, rationalists and others) who have spoken and written of a *principium individuationis* or principle of individuation. It is my hope that, in the presence of D [the Thesis of the Sortal Dependency of Individuation], we can reanimate these old doctrines in a way that is demonstrably independent of mythical conceptions of bare continuity.

Now, the only scholastics with whom Leibniz sided in connection with the problem of individuation are precisely those that he mentions either in the *Disputatio* (Soncinas, Herveus, Murcia and Suárez) or in the paper *On Transubstantiation* (Averroes, Mercenarius, Zabarella and Murcia), but certainly all these philosophers intended to mean that the substantial form is at least the main *principium individuationis* of the substance.

## 2. Wiggins' Nominalism

The thesis that the substantial form or the whole entity is the principle of individuation of the substance is tantamount (at least if, as Wiggins does in attacking the notion of *haecceitas*, Scotus' *distinctio formalis* is rejected) to the assertion that there is no problem of individuation, because that thesis removes the very assumption that generates the problem, namely, the existence of a universal element (precisely the substantial form) in the substantial *compositum*. Indeed, I submit that if the substantial form alone is sufficient for the *compositum* to be singular, then it is absolutely impossible that the form be universal or common. This is the reason why those philosophers who stick to the unity of form thesis on individuation are committed to a nominalist view of a certain sort. This nominalist view was defended by Leibniz in his *Preface to an Edition of Nizolius* (1670), where he praises Ockham's genius and agrees with him in that the principle

*Entiae non sunt multiplicanda praeter necessitatem* must be maintained in any explanation, adding the following:

From this principle the nominalists have deduced the rule that everything in the world can be explained without any reference to universals and real forms. Nothing is truer than this opinion, and nothing is more worthy of a philosopher of our time.<sup>14</sup>

Nevertheless, Leibniz is careful to avoid what he calls 'super-nominalism', first against Hobbes in the *Preface to Nizolius*, and many years later against Locke in the *New Essays*, where he defended the view that even if no *universalia in rebus* are to be admitted, the attribution of general terms to substances is not an arbitrary matter but has some foundation in reality:

Generality consists in the resemblance of singular things to one another, and this resemblance is a reality.<sup>15</sup>

Is Wiggins prepared to adopt this moderate nominalistic view on universals? It is pretty clear to me that he is, for otherwise it would be difficult to understand why it would be good for him to show "some day" that his explanation of 'sortal concept' is

fully compatible with nominalism in that reasonable acceptance of the term in which both Aristotle and Leibniz are to be reckoned nominalists, or held (in effect) that they were.<sup>16</sup>

Unless I am completely mistaken in attributing to Wiggins the former views on individuation, the question whether his doctrine of the concept is compatible with moderate nominalism becomes a central issue, because those views *imply* a nomi-

<sup>14</sup> Loemker (1969), p. 128. See also Ishiguro (1972), pp. 61, 102-103. Clearly, 'real form' must be taken here in the sense of 'universal form *in rebus*', which is precisely what Ockham rejects.

<sup>15</sup> *New Essays*, Bk. III, Ch. iii, §12. See also Ishiguro (1972), p. 61.

<sup>16</sup> SS, p. 8. Cf. also Wiggins (1967), p. 42.

nalist solution to the problem of universals (if the *distinctio formalis* is rejected). There might be a temptation to identify Wiggins' sortal concept with the essence because, after all, he characterizes the concept of a kind like *horse* as the *quidditas* of the kind: "the concept *horse* is what it is to be a horse".<sup>17</sup> It would be mistaken, however, to identify the concept *horse* with the substantial form of any singular horse *h*, because the substantial form of *h* is –according to the philosophy of individuation already sketched– the principal source of individuation of *h*, while the concept has an extension<sup>18</sup> or is something under which entities can fall,<sup>19</sup> i.e., the concept is *general*. This is precisely the reason why in the strict original philosophical sense of the term 'individuum' the sortal concept is not and cannot be a *principium individuationis* for any of the members of its extension. At *most*, the concept individuates in a derived or analogical sense (individuates<sub>2</sub>), namely, that via the concept we grasp the nature of *this* singular substance (as well as of others of the same kind) and, since such nature is the *principium individuationis* of the substance, via the concept we grasp its *principium individuationis*. But we can do this only because (1) the substance is already individual in reality and (2) the concept (say *f*) is a concept of the kind to which the substance belongs, i.e. the substance is truly an *f*. It seems to me that this distinction between the *modus essendi* and the *modus intelligendi* of the substance is clearer in Wiggins' first text *Identity and Spatio-Temporal Continuity* than in *Sameness and Substance*,<sup>20</sup> but there is scarcely any doubt that the distinction must be made anyway. Hence, it seems more appropriate to take the concept as a *construct* which is produced "around the focus of an actual specimen"<sup>21</sup> of a natural kind but applicable in general to all the members of the kind. It is clear that understood in

<sup>17</sup> SS, p. 68.

<sup>18</sup> SS, p. 68.

<sup>19</sup> SS, p. 79.

<sup>20</sup> See *Identity and Spatio-Temporal Continuity*, p. 42.

<sup>21</sup> SS, p. 84.



this way Wiggins' doctrine of the concept is compatible with the nominalism of Aristotle and Leibniz.

### 3. Conclusion

In spite of the fact that Wiggins, as if he were ashamed of openly maintaining his metaphysical views, conveys in a rather tortuous way what he means to say (his literary style is deemed obscure by some, including by me), I think that he provides enough hints and contextual points of reference as to allow us to conclude that the former reconstruction of Wiggins' thought has some plausibility. If this is so, then I would say that Wiggins' attempt to recover an Aristotelian Leibniz is successful. But I would like to defend a little bit my reconstruction. I think that it has at least the following virtues:

—It explains in what sense the sortal concept is a *principium individuationis*. It is a principle of individuation by analogy, because it synthesizes our knowledge of the natures of the members of the kind and such natures are *principia individuationis*, in the proper, fundamental and traditional sense of the term, of their corresponding substances.

—It relates in an explicit way Wiggins' work to that "speculative tradition" that he mentions but never fully identifies.

—It shows why Wiggins' theory of the concept can be made compatible with the nominalism of Aristotle and Leibniz, and why it is *urgent* to make it compatible.

—It stresses the character of the essence as *φύσις* or source of the operations of the substance, and not just as the meaning of a predicate, which is one of the main points of Wiggins' theory.

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