

On the Reality of Accidents¹

Translated by Donald Rutherford

It is worth considering whether accidents having something more than modal reality and in what this consists. And, in fact, if we suppose real accidents, either their reality is part of the reality of a substance or it adds a new reality to a substance. If it is part of the reality of a substance, it follows that the substance itself perishes in accidental changes, or becomes some other thing, and I would not yet have been me yesterday but some other thing, though extremely similar to me, just as a ship that is repaired or a commonwealth or a river are the same in name but not in fact. For with a part destroyed, a thing does not truly remain the same thing, though with the greater part surviving it is called the same as up to now, or alternatively it might happen that with all the parts now contained in it gradually destroyed, it is still sometimes called the same thing, like the ship of Theseus. However, if a part is understood to remain always, that part will indeed be the same, but the whole will not be posited along with it. For this reason, if anyone holds that a persisting part of reality is a changeable part, they fall into the opinion of those who hold that accidents add something to substantial reality. But if anyone grants that a substance perishes and arises through changes (which was the opinion of the duke of Buckingham in his ingenious essay written *in defense of the truth of religion*²), they in fact destroy all changeable substance. For since the changes of things are never ending, so that nothing stays in the same state through the least interval of time, it follows that at no time does there exist a changeable substance, nor one that endures for the least time; for what is born and dies at any moment can, strictly speaking, be said neither to exist nor to act, nor can it affect anything or be affected, since nothing is affected except in some temporal duration. Therefore, it follows that all changeable substances are removed from nature and consequently we fall into the doctrines of Spinoza and the Averroists, and of some ancients, who take God alone to be a substance and hold created things to be nothing more than modes of God. In fact, they do not escape in this way, for they are thereby forced to transfer to God the changes that they take away from created substances (obviously removed), and thus God himself will not endure, but will continuously perish and be born. And from this it follows, finally, that nothing at all exists, for if all things should once perish, as follows from this, there will be nothing to restore them; for nothing follows from nothing and nothing arises spontaneously. And so it is necessary that something persists in the change of things. But if now a part of the divine reality remains and a part perishes, we will again return to those who add accidental realities to substantial ones, and why will we not admit in creatures what we now say is in God and so abandon created substances?

¹ LH IV 7C Bl. 102. A VI.4, N. 209, pp. 994-6 (Latin). The Akademie editors date the text between September and December 1688.

² George, Duke of Buckingham, *Short Discourse upon the Reasonableness of Men's Having a Religion or Worship of God* (London, 1685).

We come now to those who think that substances have a duplicate reality, one substantial, the other accidental. They also do not lack difficulties. For it will be asked why the superadded reality is said to be in a substance as in a subject, and why it should not be considered to be a self-subsistent thing [*res per se*], albeit not persisting. Yet if that inherence seems really to affect the substantial reality, so that it consists in some real connection, it is not apparent how the accidental [reality] can perish without a change occurring in the substantial reality; therefore, again, it will be divided into a perishing part and a persisting part, contrary to the hypothesis.

But if we deny that there is any reality in accidents, as if they were nothing more than relations, we again come to a standstill. For a relation, since it results from the state of things, never arises or perishes unless some change has occurred in its foundation.

Thus far, I see no way of avoiding these difficulties except by considering *abstracta* not as things but as abbreviated ways of speaking, just as when I speak of heat, there is no need to make mention of some vague subject or to say that something is hot—and to that extent I am a nominalist, at least provisionally. I will say, therefore, that a substance has changed or that its attributes are different at different times, for this supports no uncertainty: but it is not necessary to ask whether in a change any reality perishes or arises, or whether there are different realities in a substance that are the foundations of its different predicates; and indeed, if this is asked, adjudication is difficult. It suffices to posit only substances as things and to assert truths about these. Geometers, too, do not use definitions of *abstracta*, but reduce them to *concreta*; thus Euclid does not use a definition of *ratio* that he himself holds, but one in which he explains which things are said to have the same, greater or lesser ratio.