

# *Grades of Individuality*

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## ***Abstract***

This paper offers a critical assessment of the current state of the debate about the identity and individuality of material objects. Its main aim, in particular, is to show that, in a sense to be carefully specified, the opposition between the Leibnizian 'reductionist' tradition based on discernibility and the sort of 'primitivism' that denies that facts of identity and individuality must be analysable has become out-dated. In particular, it is argued that – contrary to a widespread consensus - 'naturalised' metaphysics supports both the acceptability of non-qualitatively grounded (both 'contextual' and intrinsic) identity and a pluralistic approach to individuality and individuation. A case study is offered that focuses on non-relativistic quantum mechanics, in the context of which primitivism about identity and individuality, rather than being regarded as unscientific, is on the contrary suggested to be preferable to the complicated forms of reductionism that have recently been proposed. More generally, assuming a plausible form of anti-reductionism about scientific theories and domains, it is claimed that science can be regarded as compatible with, or even as suggesting, the existence of a series of equally plausible *grades of individuality* - the kind of individuality that prevails in a certain context and at a given level being ascertainable only on the basis of the specific scientific theory at hand.

Keywords:

Individuality; Discernibility; Identity; Reductionism; Primitivism; Contextualism.

### ***Introduction***

The aim of the present paper is to discuss philosophical perspectives on identity and individuality for material objects, and argue that – rather than being in an irreducible mutual opposition – the originally Scholastic *primitivism* (i.e., the view that individuality is intrinsic and irreducible) and the originally Leibnizian *reductionism* (i.e., the view that individuality reduces to uniqueness of properties) are really the two extremes of a spectrum of positions that can (and in fact do) peacefully coexist, as each one of them may be (and in fact is) more appropriate than the others in a specific domain of application, and for specific ways of describing that domain. In arguing for this view, we devote special attention to non-relativistic quantum mechanics, with respect to which we offer reasons for believing, *contra* a widespread opinion, that it describes a domain of primitively individuated objects. More generally, we raise doubts about the opinion that some form of reductionism is obviously to be preferred from a naturalistic perspective that aims to supply metaphysical claims with a solid scientific basis.

We begin with a brief sketch of primitivism and reductionism, and of the key role played by the Principle of the Identity of the Indiscernibles in reductionist contexts (1). In 2, we present progressively weaker versions of reductionism. In 3 we critically assess the current popularity of Leibnizian reductionism among philosophers of science, concluding that there is no real reason for scientifically-informed philosophers to be Leibnizian reductionists. In 4 we argue in favour of primitivism in more detail, this time by questioning the philosophical basis for the *non-Leibnizian* sort of reductionism recently defended by Stachel, Ladyman and other structuralists. As a specific case-study, in 5 we look at non-relativistic quantum mechanics. We suggest that, as a matter of fact, a careful consideration of recent arguments in favour of the ‘weak’ discernibility of quantum particles lends support to the claim that mere numerical difference (countability) is both epistemically *and ontologically* prior to the putative qualitative difference that ‘neo-Leibnizian’ strategies insist so much on. In 6, we conclude more generally in favour of a pluralistic and gradualistic view of individuality, moving from Leibniz’ absolute discernibility grounded in monadic properties at one end of the spectrum, to a view of individuality as based on mere (non-contextual) numerical difference and countability at the other end. Such a pluralistic stance, we suggest, requires that we attribute to things the form of individuality that can be most straightforwardly extracted from the relevant scientific description. This means that: a) In each case in which things are individuals, they are *primarily* individuals in one specific sense directly suggested by science;

and b) Given a plausible anti-reductionism about scientific theories and their ‘levels’ of application, there is no reason for thinking that individuality is given in the same form in all cases, as philosophers have instead tended to think.

### ***1. Definitions of individuality, and the received opposition***

To put it roughly, *individuality* consists in the possession of determinate self-identity and numerical distinctness from other things. It has often been argued that this fundamental aspect of things can be analysed in terms of some other, more ‘down-to-earth’ concept. The most prominent among such reductionist views is doubtlessly the view according to which the individuality of an entity supervenes on the entity’s qualities. The idea is that *something is an individual if and only if its qualitative characteristics are not the same as those of any other entity*. Clearly, according to this approach, individuality is a *derivative* concept, and talk of individuality could in principle be entirely replaced with talk involving solely the qualitative features of things. The alternative to this is, obviously enough, to regard individuality as primitive and non-reducible. The ensuing, indeed traditional, dichotomy is thus between:

- a) The view that the world is, at root, entirely constituted by *qualitative facts* (i.e., facts other than those concerning identity and number), and individuality is consequently reducible to properties;
- b) The view that the individuality of things is something over and above their qualitative aspects, so that there can be brute (primitive, ungrounded) metaphysical facts of self-identity and numerical distinctness.

In the terminology introduced by Adams (1979), the former approach takes the things’ *suchnesses* as the only components of individuals, while the latter maintains that some form of *thisness* also exists and is the primitive source of individuality. In what follows, we will refer to option a) as *reductionism* and to option b) as *primitivism*.

In modern times, reductionism was clearly and forcefully upheld by Leibniz. Leibniz’s reductionist perspective can be summarised as the view that individuality reduces to uniqueness of qualities, in such a way that the *Principle of the Identity of the Indiscernibles* (PII from now onward) holds:

$$\forall x \forall y (\forall P (Px \leftrightarrow Py)) \rightarrow (x=y).$$

Literally, the Principle says that if two entities have all the same *monadic* properties, then they are the same individual. This entails that each individual has a set of monadic properties unique to it, i.e., that individuality is the same as qualitative uniqueness.<sup>1</sup> It is clear that an assessment of the reductionist view essentially involves an inquiry into the validity and epistemic status of PII, which here we will conduct from a metaphysical rather than from a merely formal or logical viewpoint.

## 2. *The different readings of PII*

Let us start with the rather well-known fact that if predicates involving identity are *included* in the scope of the relevant universal quantifier, PII turns out to be analytically true.<sup>2</sup>

It is a widespread (and, it would seem, well-motivated) opinion that, at least within the reductionist camp, PII cannot be used as a criterion of individuation if identity and difference are regarded as properties and, therefore, *presupposed* rather than *analysed* in terms of something else.<sup>3</sup> The question that needs to be addressed when assessing reductionism, therefore, is whether a *non-trivial* version of PII – in which identity is not presupposed in any way – can be defended as a valid criterion of individuation.

In answering this question, it is useful to distinguish between two different ways of interpreting PII. On a *metaphysical* reading, PII is intended to be *necessarily* true; that is, as a matter of metaphysical necessity, no two individuals can have all the same properties in common. On an *epistemic* reading, instead, the view is that – *as far as we know* – there are good reasons for believing that numerically distinct but indiscernible individuals do not actually exist. Importantly, the metaphysical reading is based on the idea that the necessary truth of PII can be established on non-empirical grounds, and that this fact has *consequences* for our knowledge of, and claims about, things in the world; the epistemic reading reverses the order of argumentation, and claims that it is experience that gives us reasons for using PII as a criterion for ascribing individuality to things.

Rather than discussing the various arguments for or against the metaphysical reading (which, in any case, all appear far from conclusive to us), here we will simply take for granted

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<sup>1</sup> There is, of course, also an important connection with the work of Quine. On the basis of ideas of Hilbert and Bernays, Quine showed that (provided that the vocabulary of non-analysed general terms is finite) the identity sign can be paraphrased away in any first-order language, and replaced with a conjunction of non-identity-involving formulas (in particular, conditionals of the form ‘if  $Fx$  then  $Fy$ ’ for any  $x$  and  $y$  and any number of places in  $F$ ). This must be mentioned, as authors that we will discuss later on worked in an explicitly Quinean setting.

<sup>2</sup> For PII as an analytical truth, see Whitehead and Russell (1925, 57), Church (1956, 302) and Brody (1980, 6-9).

<sup>3</sup> For a defence of this claim, see Black (1952, 155), Ayer (1954, 29), Katz (1983), and Rodriguez-Pereyra (2006).

that PII is *not* a necessary truth, and that it is its *epistemic* reading that deserves discussion – where “epistemic”, crucially, presupposes a confrontation with our best scientific knowledge. We will consequently assess PII, and reductionism more in general, from a ‘naturalistic’ standpoint, one according to which our metaphysical claims should be supported by, and be compatible with, our best current scientific knowledge of the world.

However, before moving on, and as a first step towards the view that individuality ‘comes in degrees’, let us begin by reminding the reader that Leibniz committed himself to a *strong* version of PII (henceforth, **PIIa**), one that *excludes* spatial location from the scope of the universal quantifier ranging over properties appearing in the principle, and only takes into account monadic intrinsic properties. Once Leibniz’s peculiar theologico-metaphysical reasons for wanting such a restriction are dropped, however, a weaker form of PII, quantifying also over spatial locations (**PIIb**), presents itself as far more plausible. The most important consequence of the move from **PIIa** to **PIIb** is that the latter allows for otherwise qualitatively identical things to be made numerically distinct by the mere fact that they exist at different places. This weaker version of PII, that is, can be used to express the age-old idea of using space as a *principium individuationis* – an idea defended, among others, by Aquinas, Kant and Schopenhauer.<sup>4</sup> Obviously enough, any two objects that are distinct individuals according to **PIIa** are also distinct according to **PIIb**, but not conversely. Consequently, the ‘grade of individuality’ that **PIIb** ascribes to entities is proportionally *weaker* than that ‘captured’ by **PIIa**.

But is such a weaker formulation of PII compelling? The *locus classicus* with respect to a critical assessment of **PIIb** is Black’s (1952) completely symmetric universe, only inhabited by two numerically distinct spheres having all the same monadic properties. In particular, it looks as though the spheres’ spatial positions must be defined in *relational terms*, because – *by hypothesis* – *only* the two spheres exist “and nothing else” (1952, 156).<sup>5</sup> It would seem that Black’s thought experiment shows that there is at least one conceivable circumstance in which we cannot make recourse even to space as *principium individuationis* and, therefore, **PIIb** is violated: that *one* sphere is distinct from *the other* sphere seems to be a *primitive* fact, neither grounded in an intrinsic qualitative difference nor in a difference with respect to *location in space*. Ignoring the long-standing debate about the actual strength of Black’s argument<sup>6</sup>, here

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<sup>4</sup> And by no means limited to historical figures in philosophy: for the influence of Schopenhauer’s view of space on Einstein’s thoughts on separability, for instance, see Howard (1997).

<sup>5</sup> It could be objected that Black doesn’t explicitly rule out the existence of a spatial background. This, however, doesn’t affect the strength of the counterexample, as the location occupied by each sphere must in any case be described in absolutely general terms, turning out to be the same for the two spheres.

<sup>6</sup> Black’s argument might be rejected as question-begging (as in, for example, Odegard (1964)) or as re-describable in reductionist terms (as in Hacking (1975)). But the former objection has no force here, as we are

we will instead notice that when presented with Black's universe, one has the feeling that something has been tacitly 'smuggled in' in an illegitimate way. This something, in particular, has to do with *the status of the spatial relation* holding among the identical spheres, which indeed seems to constitute a qualitative difference. Does this mean that the formulations of PII considered so far do not capture all possible qualitative facts about things, that is, all possible forms of individuality as discernibility?

Following certain Quinean reflections, a positive answer to this question has been recently given (Saunders (2006)). Quine (1976) explained that what he calls *strong* and *moderate discriminability* are in fact not the only possibilities. It is also possible, says Quine (ibid.; 114), that two objects are *weakly discriminable*, a fact that occurs when they satisfy a formula containing a predicate satisfiable by two entities in any order, but not by one of them alone, such as, for instance, "...goes in the opposite direction to...". Black's spheres, says Saunders, clearly turn out to be weakly discernible (here, we will not follow Quine's idiosyncratic terminology), as there exists a *weakly discerning relation* holding between them: in particular, an *irreflexive* spatial relation determining that *each one of the spheres is at some distance from the other (but not from itself)* and, consequently, that there are *two* numerically distinct but qualitatively identical spheres.

The foregoing indicates that it is in fact possible to formulate a version of PII that sets even weaker requirements on individuality than both **PIIa** and **PIIb**, thus individuating certain entities that both these forms of PII fail to individuate. Informally, what we will from now on refer to as **PIIc** says that if any two entities have all the same monadic properties and partake in no irreflexive relation, then they are one and the same individual; hence, that the participation in an irreflexive relation is sufficient for individuality.

However, **PIIc** appears to be much more controversial than the other two versions of PII. This is due to the fact that, while **PIIc** is an unquestionable *logical* principle – recall that, as Quine showed, the identity relation is in fact coextensive with the conjunction of *all* the relevant non-identity-involving formulas whenever there is a finite number of unanalysed general terms – this does not *ipso facto* ground it as an indisputable *metaphysical* claim. For, there is no obvious correspondence between the predicates appearing in a language that we might decide to use for describing the world and the properties and relations that are actually exemplified in the world itself. And this is particularly true when it comes to relations, as

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looking for a justification of PII in the first place. With respect to the latter, it must be noticed instead that a re-description may not always be available, and Hacking's strategy might in any case not be regarded as a legitimate reductionist response. An 'extreme' option is to follow O'Leary-Hawthorne (1995) in claiming that in Black's universe one has only one sphere at some distance from itself, but this really looks like a last resort for the defender of PII, especially from a 'naturalistic' viewpoint.

these have a much more problematic metaphysical connotation than ‘canonical’ properties. Incidentally, it is crucial here to appreciate this logic/metaphysics divide because, while acknowledging that PII can be given independent logical motivations, here we are interested in its role within a naturalistic metaphysics of the sort we are after. Consequently, we feel authorised to bracket the discussion of the logical status of *PIIc*, and focus instead on the ontological presuppositions it rests upon, and on its ontological consequences.

In this context, however, an immediate problem with the proposal of using weak discernibility to neutralise anti-reductionist counterexamples of the sort devised by Black is that it smells of circularity. In particular, it could be objected that no relation can be said to hold unless we have *two* relata to begin with, so that numerical distinctness must be *presupposed*. To this charge of circularity (irreflexive relations can discern only if we already have two individuals) it might be replied that relations need not always be derivative, i.e., dependent on the prior existence of their relata, and could at least in some cases *ground*, or be prior to, the numerical distinctness of things. This is, of course, a contentious and possibly *ad hoc* move, as we don’t seem to have independent evidence to assume the existence of such relations.

Be that it is may, in order to give our opponent all the ground she needs, we won’t exclude that this counterintuitive view of relations can be consistently upheld so as to avoid the circularity objection. For us, it will in fact be sufficient to show that since the reasons that are normally adduced for preferring reductionism to primitivism will not turn out to be compelling, the controversial status of relations existing prior to relata will give us an *additional* reason for doubting the force of weak discernibility as a weapon for the reductionist. Indeed, we will argue that at least in some cases primitivism *should* in fact be preferred to reductionism, if only on mere grounds of simplicity and minimisation of metaphysical revision.

In more detail, in the sections to follow we will first of all argue that, contrary to what seems to be a widespread consensus, a proper naturalisation of metaphysics doesn’t by any means entail that we should opt for a reductionist conception of individuality. The same holds, we will also argue, for a relatively new, non-Leibnizian, form of reductionism – endorsed by various structuralists – according to which identity is always contextually, albeit not necessarily qualitatively, determined. After that, we will look specifically at non-relativistic quantum mechanics and suggest that it is best interpreted as a theory of primitively individuated entities. At the same time, on the basis of a plausible form of anti-reductionism about scientific theories and their levels of application, we will argue that naturalists should

nevertheless allow for a *plurality* of forms of individuality, i.e., for the possibility that entities in one scientific domain are individuated in a way different from entities in another scientific domain. What is fundamental, we will claim, is to look at the best available scientific description of the entities we are dealing with in a given context, and see which form of individuality can be most straightforwardly ‘extracted’ from that description in that context.

### ***3. The alleged scientific basis of Leibnizian reductionism***

As witnessed by the recent flourishing literature on identity and discernibility in the special sciences (physics in particular), scientifically-minded philosophers who aim to answer metaphysical questions are in the vast majority of cases sympathetic to reductionism about individuality. A tacit assumption underpinning such endorsement of reductionism by naturalistically inclined philosophers is, no doubt, one according to which reductionism allows one to account for the individuality of things without invoking any mysterious metaphysical factors going beyond what science tells us. In particular, the main motivation for insisting on a reductionist view of individuality seems to be the desire to avoid all metaphysical assumptions that are not empirically supported by well-corroborated science or, worse, that cannot in principle ‘make a difference’ at the observable level (where “observability” here is being understood in the broadest possible manner): haecceitates, bare particulars, etc.

In the quantum case, for example, it is exactly the endorsement of a form of naturalism that led many to regard the question whether particles are *discernible* as fundamental. For, that quantum particles may be regarded as individuals by attributing some form of ‘transcendental individuality’ to them is well-known at least since Post (1963) and French and Redhead (1988). But naturalists, while clearly interested in trying to preserve the idea that quantum mechanics describes a domain of individual objects (peculiar in some respects though these may be), have typically rejected this solution as evidently relying on non-scientifically-respectable metaphysical posits.

Since the specific case of quantum mechanics will be discussed in more detail later, here we will focus on the more general inference from naturalism to reductionism. We believe that three important points must be made with respect to such inference.

1) As we see the issue, first of all, in most of the current literature on the topic there is an as simple as much as misleading implicit conflation between *two* different ways of determining what is supported by, or to be deemed meaningful on the basis of, science and what is not. The first equates what is acceptable with what is qualitative – roughly, with



properties like colour, mass, charge and the likes, that do not ‘encode’ any ‘information’ about the identity of any specific individual. The second defines what is naturalistically acceptable as *whatever* contributes to a complete description of things according to our best current science. While the former stance is obviously much closer to the Leibnizian spirit, it seems to us that it sacrifices (or, at any rate, may sacrifice) a lot of what qualifies as part and parcel of scientific theorising in a way that, in fact, the naturalistically-inclined philosopher should *not* accept. Hence, one should rather opt for the latter understanding of ‘scientifically acceptable’.

1) For one, notice that *indiscernible objects can make an empirical difference* in spite of their being indiscernible, and *merely in virtue of the fact that they are numerically distinct*. This implies that the qualitative uniqueness of material objects is not necessary for the empirical significance and the scientific meaningfulness of claims concerning physical systems containing those objects. For instance, a world with two exactly similar material objects exhibits twice the mass of a world with only one of them; and the same holds for typical quantum-mechanical systems, where it is possible that two of them *only* differ with respect to how many particles (i.e., how many instances of certain properties) they contain (see Hawley (2009)). This only holds as long as properties are additive, of course, but it is clear that many of the relevant physical properties of material objects are indeed additive. This too often overlooked fact should already give some pause to the scientifically-minded metaphysician who aims to accept only ‘empirically grounded’ metaphysical posits: there are in fact no obvious reasons for ruling out indiscernible objects as a matter of principle solely on the basis of empirical indistinguishability plus Ockham’s razor!

2) Secondly, the possibility that facts of numerical distinctness might be as fundamental as, or even *more fundamental* than, facts about qualities seems to be directly suggested by some scientific theories. We will argue in more detail later that the use of the term “more fundamental” is justified in non-relativistic quantum mechanics, where all formulations of physical problems consider the number of particles as a fundamental assumption, one which enters into the construction of the right kind of model for the physical problem at hand (that is, a Hilbert space or a configuration space with the correct number of dimensions), independently of considerations related to the qualitative features of things. In other words, we will see that the presence of particle names or ‘labels’ in the quantum *formalism*, rather than regarded as an accidental feature of quantum theory, can instead be legitimately given a direct physical significance (notice, incidentally, that we do not need to restrict this claim to anti-symmetric quantum states, but can extend it also to bosons).

3) Our third point is that primitive intrinsic identities need *not* be taken to constitute ‘mysterious metaphysical additions’ to the qualities of things, and *may* simply coincide with fundamental, ungrounded facts about the existence of certain entities. In other words, there is no reason for thinking that primitive intrinsic individualities can only exist if they are based on full-blown ‘properties’ additional to the other properties of things. Historically, this was clearly stated already within the Scholastic tradition, that many naturalistic metaphysicians are (too) quick to dismiss: while Duns Scotus did in fact regard haecceitates as full-blown components of things, Ockham – in keeping with his general nominalistic attitude – insisted that individuality just corresponds to a fundamental ‘way of being’ of objects, i.e., to facts about those objects that neither allow for nor demand further analysis. It seems to us that the Ockhamian perspective is both internally consistent and perfectly compatible with a naturalistic methodology. To the reductionist who remains sceptical about this and wonders whether it is anything more than a ‘terminological trick’ we respond as follows: if the naturalist is *never* allowed to introduce something that is primitively what it is, how can the reductionist fully and satisfactorily develop his/her own theory? Properties too, be they universals or particularised instances, have well-defined identity conditions, in virtue of which they are the specific entities they are; and these conditions are either analysable, but then the threat of an infinite regress immediately arises, or else are primitive. The same seems to hold for any ontological construction.

#### ***4. Non-Leibnizian reductionism?***

Indeed, self-proclaimed naturalists have already acknowledged the existence of valid counterexamples even to *PIIc*. In referring to the PII in the field of mathematics, for instance, Ladyman (2007) considers two-node graphs with no edges (mathematical systems composed of two absolutely indiscernible objects) and concludes that, for cases like these, there is no reason to expect that some Leibnizian principle will turn out to apply.

By distinguishing sharply between mathematical and physical ontology, one could argue that this sort of considerations are simply irrelevant for the case at hand, since we are only interested in the ontological nature of material, *concrete* objects. Apart from the fact that one could reject the existence of a sharp divide between mathematical and physical ontology, however, this conclusion would be hasty. For, it is certainly possible to refer to the abstract domain inquired into by mathematics as a model for how to conceive of the physical world, especially if there is evidence for the claim that there are clear analogies between what can be said about certain mathematical objects on the one hand, and physical objects as they are

represented by mathematical models on the other. In this sense, we agree with Ladyman that reflections about mathematical ontology have at least heuristic value in the present context.<sup>7</sup>

Indeed, Ladyman compares the abovementioned graphs with quantum statistics, where identical particles in the same state are notoriously permutation-invariant, and with space-time points in General Relativity (GR). In particular, if in GR the metric field is defined on the manifold functions as a globally defined individuating entity for the manifold points (Stachel (1993), Dorato and Pauri (2006)), then diffeomorphically-related models can be regarded as physically identical, as it should be in order to avoid undesirable violations of determinism implied by the hole argument (Earman and Norton (1987)). Several authors, and Ladyman among these, take this to mean that the points of the manifold are not discernible in any way, and are only contextually individuated by the relations that characterise the metric field as it is defined on the manifold. This example should suffice to accept the claim that examples coming from pure mathematics may provide evidence to the fact that the nature or “grade” of individuality of certain mathematical objects can be the same as that of certain physical entities, provided that we have independent reasons to suppose that their formal counterparts in the mathematical model do genuinely refer. This claim entails a structural analogy between the ontological status of certain mathematical objects and certain physical objects.

If this general approach to the relationship between the mathematical and the physical domains is accepted (and we don’t see why it shouldn’t, given the patent structural analogies between the mathematical and the physical), there is only one move available to the reductionist in view of the potential counterexamples to PII. That is, to give up one of the central tenets of his/her position – the qualitative analysability of individuality – but stick to the other key element of reductionism, namely the idea that *identity and individuality are contextually determined*.

Indeed, Ladyman explicitly claims that, in those cases in which the identity and individuality of an object cannot be grounded in qualitative differences, they *must* anyway be regarded as determined by the whole system to which the object in question belongs. In other words, one should postulate some sort of non-qualitative ‘identity- and difference-making relations’ that characterise the total system/structure.

This leads straightforwardly to a ‘*non-Leibnizian*’ form of reductionism, corresponding to what Stachel and Ladyman call ‘contextualism’. Contextualism is, in particular, a form of reductionism because it invites one to analyse the individuality of objects in terms of

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<sup>7</sup> We are grateful to an anonymous referee for pressing us the point concerning mathematical as opposed to physical ontology.

something else, external to the objects themselves; but it is also non-Leibnizian because this something else is not (at least not necessarily) something qualitative.

But why choose contextualism rather than primitivism? Recall that, while fully in agreement with the reasoning that led Ladyman to embrace contextualism, in the previous section we also questioned the traditional arguments against primitivism, according to which primitive identities are unacceptable, non-scientifically-grounded, metaphysical posits.

The contextualist inference from the examples coming from graph theory and GR to the claim that, *necessarily*, identity is determined contextually rests on one fundamental argument, which goes as follows. Primitive intrinsic individuality entails *haecceitism*, i.e., differences between what distinct worlds say *de re* about certain individuals that do not correspond to overall qualitative differences among those worlds. But haecceitism is directly contradicted by contemporary science. In particular, the sort of permutation invariance that, as we have just seen, is pervasive across different scientific domains points to anti-haecceitism, as there are no two possible worlds described by the relevant theory that differ *merely* with respect to the identities of the things they contain. Hence, the naturalist metaphysician must in any case be a reductionist about individuality.

Is this a compelling argument for endorsing reductionism at least in its non-Leibnizian version? We think the answer to this question is negative, for at least two reasons.

First, *primitive intrinsic individuality need not entail haecceitistic differences*. What is true of distinct worlds is not univocally determined by the nature of the identity of each individual object among those inhabiting them, and intra-world and trans-world considerations in fact have an important degree of mutual *independence*. Indeed, metaphysical frameworks are available in which objects possess primitive intrinsic identities but this fact does not entail haecceitism.<sup>8</sup> A counterpart-theoretic treatment of possible worlds, for example, allows for primitive intra-world identities (i.e., primitive intrinsic individuality for objects) together with anti-haecceitism about modality. And it is interesting to notice that this is directly relevant with respect to the physical evidence Ladyman refers to. For instance, with reference to GR, Butterfield (1989) argued that, if points of the manifold have primitive intrinsic identities but these are not preserved if one exchanges them while preserving their overall relationships (which is what happens on the counterpart-theoretic account of trans-world identity), substantivalism is kept safe from the alleged dire consequences of the hole argument.

One may object that, if counterpart theory and other suspicious ‘metaphysical tricks’ are set aside, that entities (may) possess primitive identities immediately leads one to

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<sup>8</sup> In other words, haecceitism and the view that individuals (may) possess haecceities are distinct and largely independent theses.

acknowledge the possibility of haecceitistic differences. Here, however, comes our second point: when one has to account for specific non-haecceitistic facts which apparently contradict the claim that things possess primitive intrinsic identities, there might be viable, *non-ad-hoc* explanations of the evidence that tell us *why* haecceitistic differences are not manifest - not empirically meaningful - *without at the same time involving a more general choice between haecceitism and anti-haecceitism*. Consider for example quantum statistics, in which exchanging indistinguishable particles does not give rise to new, statistically relevant states. In this case, contrary to contextualism as well as to the ‘Received View’ (according to which the evidence points to the non-individuality of particles), it is *possible* to claim that (i) particles possess primitive intrinsic identities but (ii) their state-dependent properties are *holistic properties* that only belong to the whole, in such a way that they exclusively describe *correlations* between parts of it (for more details, see Morganti (2009)).<sup>9</sup> This immediately explains the peculiar features of the quantum domain while leaving it open whether, *had* their state-dependent properties been monadic, quantum particles *would have* given rise to haecceitistic differences. It can of course be questioned which explanation is the most plausible and least costly, but the mere existence of an alternative possibility suffices to show that the claimed implication between intrinsic primitive identity and ‘empirically relevant’ haecceitism doesn’t hold.

Another important thing to notice is how relevant a consideration of contextualism is with respect to our earlier discussion of naturalism and putatively mysterious metaphysical posits. We have already argued that primitivists can agree wholeheartedly with reductionists that mysterious, real yet non-physical, entities should be avoided when providing a metaphysical account of reality. Here, we have just seen that contextualists present their thoroughly non-Leibnizian position as motivated by science, hence as eminently satisfactory from a naturalistic viewpoint. Logically, this can only mean that contextualists regard contextual, non-qualitatively analysable facts of numerical identity and distinctness as not corresponding to mysterious metaphysical posits; thus, that they see naturalism as independent of Leibnizian reductionism. But then it follows that, *exactly in the same way as the relations of numerical difference emphasised by contextualists*, primitive intrinsic identities need *not* be taken to constitute ‘metaphysical additions’ to the qualities of things, and *may* simply coincide with fundamental, ungrounded facts about the existence of certain entities (one may even go so far as to saying that primitive intrinsic individuality is nothing but a limiting case of ungrounded

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<sup>9</sup> Following this line, it might even be suggested very generally that a modification of our entrenched beliefs about other aspects of reality (e.g., the *properties* of composite systems) should always be preferred over one involving the *identity and individuality of objects*).

*contextual* individuality within a system composed of only one entity). In other words, if Ladyman/Stachel-style contextualism is a live option in the physical world in any context in which the grade of individuality is, so to put it, ‘very low’ because not qualitatively grounded, in the very same situations intrinsic, primitive individuality is also admissible, at least in what we called its ‘Ockhamian’ form in the previous section.

From these considerations and the ensuing metaphysical underdetermination, we infer that the necessity of contextualism has not been argued for convincingly, while primitivism gains further credibility. The analysis just carried out, however, does *not* simply point to the fact that the metaphysics of identity and individuation is to be regarded as underdetermined by the evidence.

In the next section, we will consider one specific example, widely discussed in the recent literature, and provide reasons for regarding the entities in the relevant domain as primitively individuated. We will argue that the considerations brought to bear in the course of the case study – having to do with the formal features of the relevant theory and the way in which these are most straightforwardly interpreted in metaphysical terms – lend support to primitivism in that context. This, however, does *not* mean that one should generalize to other domains the specific conclusions about identity and individuality arrived at in the case study, since in other domains reductionism is (or, at least, may be) a better option. Our take-home lesson will be, in conclusion, that in most (if not all) cases it is reasonable to think that science can be supplied with a well-defined and compelling (albeit different for different cases) metaphysical interpretation; but a form of *pluralism* about identity and individuality is advisable, one which *includes* primitivism as an acceptable metaphysical stance also for naturalists.

Before continuing, however, one remaining question has to be addressed in this section. Could the naturalist introduce forms of PII that are able to capture non-qualitative, *but scientifically grounded*, facts of numerical identity and distinctness as those discussed above? This would mean to add what we might label *PIId* and *PIIe* to the various versions of PII already presented, the *former* capturing the relations of numerical difference grounding *contextual* non-qualitative individuality, the *latter* the intrinsic facts of numerical uniqueness grounding intrinsic, non-qualitative individuality. We think that this attempt to extend the Leibnizian tradition (hence, reductionism) so as to allow for individuality facts only grounded in countability is not necessarily doomed to failure: for, the relevant properties are, as we argued, part of the scientific description of the domain in question, and it would be at least possible to interpret ‘modern-day’ reductionism about individuality as the view that *whatever*

appears in the relevant scientific description should be quantified over in PII, and individuality be reconstructed accordingly.<sup>10</sup> However, we also believe that this perspective is in tension with the spirit of the Leibnizian/reductionist tradition, and in particular with the non-triviality requirement for PII already discussed in section 2. This is just to be expected, since we are now considering the ‘extreme’ end of the spectrum of grades of individuality where individuals differ *solo numero* and, consequently, their individuality is not really reduced to anything. We thus conclude that the two forms of reductionism discussed so far (namely qualitative and *solo numero* difference) had better be kept apart.

### ***5. Non-relativistic quantum mechanics, weak discernibility and countability***

As promised, we now move on to discussing one specific case, the identity and non-individuality of particles in non-relativistic quantum mechanics. In particular, we will look at the recent debate about the ontological status of quantum particles and argue that there are reasons for attributing primitive individuality to them, without betraying the spirit of a sensible form of naturalism about metaphysics.

Surely, our everyday experience and classical mechanics support the idea that distinct objects *must* differ with respect to their spatial location. However, in the quantum domain things stand otherwise. In an influential paper we have already mentioned, French and Redhead (1988) started from the (controversial but widespread) identification of quantum properties with the quantities denoted by the probabilities appearing in the formalism, and considered two-particle systems of identical particles. They concluded that, both for fermions and for bosons, two particles of the same kind that partake in the same physical system have all the same properties, *including (potential) spatial location*.<sup>11</sup> However, French and Redhead only took into account ***PIIa*** and ***PIIb*** in their paper. Indeed, it is now generally agreed that ***PIIb*** (and, consequently, ***PIIa***) fails in quantum mechanics. What about ***PIIc***?

It would seem that the fact that quantum particles can share all their properties including potential spatial location (defined in terms of probabilities) makes ***PIIc*** fail too in this context. In a recent paper that we have already mentioned, however, Saunders argued that fermions in the singlet state of spin are weakly discernible, because they are in an irreflexive relation expressed by the symmetric but irreflexive predicate ‘... has opposite  $\uparrow$ -spin component of spin to...’ (2006; 59). Saunders’ argument has been made more general and rigorous by Muller and Saunders (2008) and Muller and Seevinck (2009). The more general argument

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<sup>10</sup> Remember our distinction above between two ways of understanding naturalism.

<sup>11</sup> French and Redhead’s results have been later improved upon by Butterfield (1993) and Huggett (2003).

(from now on, ‘MSS’ argument’) – which, quite importantly, doesn’t employ probabilities to define the relevant properties – goes as follows:

- 1) Quantum particles are well-defined in number (COUNTABILITY);
- 2) Relations can be metaphysically genuine and yet *fail* to be reducible to monadic properties of their relata;
- 3) Physical discernibility must be grounded in *physically meaningful properties*;
- 4) *By using COUNTABILITY*, relations can be constructed out of physically meaningful single-particle operators (hence, satisfying 3)) that hold in many-particle systems of identical particles and satisfy the requirement for weak discernibility;
- 5) Since – in a way that should be deemed unproblematic in virtue of 2) – these relations are not reducible to monadic properties of their relata, weak discernibility is the maximum degree of discernibility that can be obtained in the relevant quantum systems;
- 6) However, weakly discerning relations can be reconstructed for *all* quantum systems.

The conclusion of MSS’ argument is thus that in quantum mechanics *PIIc* is *always* capable to discern, a fact that can be generalised to all particles and Hilbert spaces of all dimensions.<sup>12</sup> This is very important for our discussion, as it seems to provide a reason for regarding PII, and therefore reductionism, as at least contingently true in our world: while macroscopic, classical objects appear to invariably obey *PIIa* or at least *PIIb*, it now seems that more basic constituents of reality never violate (at least) *PIIc* – roughly for the same reason for which Black’s spheres do not violate it. This would clearly suffice for supporting what we have called the epistemic reading of PII in section 2.

Things are not so simple, however: MSS’ argument raises a number of issues that are not easily sorted out and, we think, eventually lend support to the theses we are presenting in this paper.

First, Muller and Seevinck themselves explain that their proof leads to treat two identical bosons in a factorisable, symmetric direct product state as *discernible* while, intuitively, such entities do *not* appear to be discernible. They then state that the discernibility of such bosons should be accepted in the same way in which one accepts other ‘quantum mysteries’, such as the possibility of Schrödinger’s cat (2009; Sec. 3, ‘Remark 4’). But of course, one may take

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<sup>12</sup> In particular, Muller and Saunders use only spin degrees of freedom (specifically, total spin relations) in finite Hilbert spaces; and more general commutator relations holding between distinct single-particle operators (e.g., position and momentum) in the case of infinite-dimensional Hilbert spaces.



the alternative route of *modus tollens* and use this consequence of their argument to question MSS' conclusion.

Second, one may reject the relations constructed by MSS and accuse the latter of a form of “naïve realism about operators” (Daumer, Dürr, Goldstein and Zanghì (1996)). Indeed, MSS do repeatedly point out that the relations they regard as weakly discerning are derived from operators whose physical meaningfulness is not questioned by anybody; but does this mean that the relations themselves are unexceptionable?

Thirdly, and relatedly, one may protest, with Dieks and Veerstegh (2008) and Ladyman and Bigaj (2010), that weak discernibility at least betrays the Quine-Leibniz reductionist spirit, in that it doesn't correspond to the possibility of *actually* telling particles apart from each other through physical means and/or of establishing the genuineness of the relevant relations via ‘symmetry-breaking’. Here too, the argument is certainly not conclusive, but definitely relevant for our present purposes. On the one hand, MSS need not be impressed by the sort of operationalist arguments presented by Dieks, Veerstegh, Ladyman and Bigaj. In general, reductionism need not be based on the possibility of *actually discerning* through physical means. On the other hand, one may take this objection to MSS' argument to foster the above, independently developed, doubts about the status of the alleged discerning relations. It is also worth pointing out that MSS draw a distinction between *individuals* (objects that are absolutely discernible on the basis of monadic and/or relational properties) and *relationals* (objects that are only weakly discernible) without saying anything explicit about the motivation for this differentiation. Even if, in all probability, this is just the result of a terminological choice based on logical considerations and established philosophical usage, such a differentiation might be intended as having *ontological* weight, i.e., as entailing that weak discernibility is considered by MSS to be insufficient for ‘full-blown individuality’. Obviously enough, this represents another bit of support for the pluralistic view on individuality that we are developing in this paper.

Of course, the foregoing is far from sufficient for a rejection of MSS' argument. However, that is not what we are looking for here. Rather, our point is that, once one puts the above considerations together with the infamous question, pointed at earlier, whether or not relations can ‘come first’ with respect to their relata, the overall scenario is clearly the following: MSS develop a rigorous and clever, but also rather complicated and philosophically controversial, argument whose endorsement is mainly, if not *exclusively*, motivated by the presupposition of the correctness of Leibnizian reductionism, or at least by the supposed unavailability of a

different, non-reductive approach to individuality.<sup>13</sup> But if these assumptions turned out not be obviously compelling for the naturalist, one would have a very good motivation for looking for a (naturalistically acceptable) alternative that doesn't require, in order to preserve the general Leibnizian framework, to (i) posit irreducible relations; (ii) be naïve or at least 'very liberal' with respect to which properties are physically genuine; (iii) accept counterintuitive conclusions about certain physical systems; and, perhaps, even (iv) allow for entities which belong to a new, *sui generis* category.<sup>14</sup>

It should be clear by now what, in view of this, our suggestion is going to be: a hitherto ignored (at least by naturalists) alternative – based on primitivism – is available and allows for a great methodological gain in terms of simplicity, clarity and conservativeness with respect to entrenched metaphysical beliefs and schemes, while being at least equally satisfactory in terms of defining an ontological interpretation that meets the criteria and constraints set by a naturalistic methodology. As a consequence of this, we conclude that primitivism should be preferred to Leibnizian reductionism at least in the non-relativistic quantum case.

Crucially, the basis for this assertion is given by the physics itself. It consists of the simple and uncontroversial fact that premise 4) above is essentially based on premise 1), that is, on COUNTABILITY. If we are right in suggesting that primitivism is not necessarily in conflict with naturalism about metaphysics, it immediately follows from this that there is a much simpler alternative to the complicated scheme put forward by MSS, with all the issues it raises: namely, *to regard COUNTABILITY not just as a merely formal fact about particle labels, but as metaphysically and physically significant in itself*, without searching for additional principles in terms of which the countable entities could be regarded as discernible. In other words, one could maintain that the “presence” of  $n$  particles at the formal level has a direct ontological counterpart, so that it can be concluded that quantum particles are individuals *independently of their qualities*. After all, if the fact that a given physical system is composed of  $n$  particles in a purely formal sense is fundamental for even starting to show that the entities composing the system are discernible, it seems perfectly legitimate to regard quantum particles as ('low-degree') individuals by moving from a purely formal to a non-

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<sup>13</sup> We do not attribute this presupposition to MSS themselves because they seem quite neutral on this. In fact, what they claim seems to be motivated by the mere presupposition that the question of whether physical objects can adequately be described by using PII is an interesting one.

<sup>14</sup> Notice, in this connection, that a reductionist viewpoint seems to be shared also by authors who disagree with MSS. For instance, Dieks and Versteegh (2008) conclude their critique of MSS by arguing that one should opt for a holistic interpretation of quantum systems of identical particles (i.e., one where the total system simply has no component particles) (compare Hawley's (2009) 'summing defence' of PII). This clearly suggests that Dieks and Versteegh too reject primitivism as unscientific.

formal reading of countability, without caring about qualitative properties and (in)discernibility.<sup>15</sup>

Summing up, the moral of our case study is as follows. Quantum particles can and should, we claim, be regarded as primitively individuated, simply because they are countable at the level of the formalism (a fact used in the extant proofs of their weak discernibility) and the extant ontological alternatives do not offer any advantage when an accurate critical comparison on the basis of methodological and pragmatic criteria is carried out. Opting for primitivism allows for a straightforward, uncomplicated ontological interpretation of the theory. We hope it is clear by now that accepting the view that countability can be read in an ontological sense directly from the formal language of the theory does not amount to prejudging the issue in our favour without giving arguments, nor is it “naïve realism about the formalism”. It simply amounts to preferring the simplest choice available for the interpretation of the relevant domain of material objects. In particular, in view of what we have been writing so far about the status of primitivism in a naturalistic context, this view should appear plausible and well-motivated to naturalists, especially in view of the price one has to pay to defend reductionism. Finally, notice that our form of primitivism is *not* incompatible with the view that quantum particles – under certain (non-negligible) assumptions – turn out to be weakly discernible: in our picture, it is perfectly possible to claim that primitively individuated objects also possess a derivative, less fundamental, grade of individuality – captured in this case by *PIIc* above.

### ***6. Should we be primitivists in general?***

We have argued that primitivism (when aptly formulated) does not imply a ‘jump’ to a metaphysical viewpoint that is in principle unacceptable for the naturalist, and that it is in fact preferable in at least one important scientific domain. As a matter of fact, we suggested, a simple criterion – according to which one should always define one’s ontology on the basis of the simplest and most direct interpretation (compatible with a naturalist methodology) of the language of the relevant theory – makes primitivism preferable in the case of non-relativistic quantum mechanics. An important question to be asked now is whether this doesn’t make primitivism valid generally, i.e., for individuals at all levels. In particular, one might think that since quantum mechanics describes the most fundamental ‘building blocks’ of reality, of which everything else is made of, then individuals at all less fundamental levels – i.e., the

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<sup>15</sup> Interestingly, Ladyman and Bigaj express ideas similar to ours when they suggest that perhaps “anything that is the value of a first-order variable is an individual” (2010; 135), but do not emphasise the role played by countability assumptions in the arguments in favour of the weak discernibility of quantum particles.

individuals described by the other special sciences – will also automatically be individuated primitively: they will just be the individuals arising from the composition of (primitively individuated) particles  $x_1, x_2, \dots, x_n$ .

However, this only holds if one assumes a strong, or “avid” form of reductionism, i.e., a micro-reductionism *à la* Putnam-Oppenheim, according to which it is in principle possible to translate everything higher-level sciences say exclusively in the vocabulary of fundamental physics, in this case, non-relativistic quantum mechanics (of course, one also needs to assume that the latter theory has reached the “bottom” level of reality). As is well-known, though, this reductionist view is not very popular in contemporary philosophy of science – and, we believe, rightly so. If anything, what one can reasonably hope to achieve given the present status of the debate is (refined) Nagel-type reductions endowed with an explanatory, not an ontological, connotation.<sup>16</sup> In other words, it seems fair to claim that theories describing different levels of reality might turn out to be in relevant mutual relationships, and there may even be a lot in the language of a higher-level theory that can be said without a significant loss of content in the language of a more fundamental theory. But by no means should this be interpreted as justifying any project of ontological reduction.

Now, if this is the case, it follows that ontological questions such as that of individuality *can and should be asked in a level- and context-dependent fashion*, that is, always with specific and explicit reference to the entities belonging to the domain of inquiry of a specific science. This, we claim, gives us good reasons to be ‘naturalistic pluralists’ about individuality, in the sense that the opposition between primitivism and reductionism can and should be overcome in favour of a more comprehensive and flexible view, allowing for different ‘grades of individuality’ to be evaluated and assessed on the basis of their applicability and usefulness in the various specific theoretical contexts.

At this point, given our emphasis on the language of the theory and on countability, one may consider it more or less obvious that objects are always countable at least at the formal level. This, however, is not so. The attribution of the various forms of individuality on the basis of our best available descriptions of reality requires, no doubt, a much more detailed treatment, and is a task for which further work is certainly needed. For the time being, it seems at any rate safe to claim, in a rather general fashion, that for the vast majority of macroscopic entities Leibniz’ metaphysical views seem to apply at least contingently – think, in particular, of biological entities (apart from the possibility of clones) –, and *PIIIa*

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<sup>16</sup> For an interesting defence of a neo-Nagelian account of reduction, see for example Dizadji-Bahmani, Frigg and Hartmann (2010). Another account of reduction, in terms of asymptotic behaviour, is spelled out by Batterman (2002).

consequently holds for them. Once classical mechanics (supplemented by an assumption of impenetrability which, incidentally, is not an integral part of the theory) is adopted, *PIIb* becomes a natural criterion of individuation: particles may have absolutely all the same monadic intrinsic properties, but they always differ with respect to position. In the quantum world, however, the landscape changes. As things stand, we have argued, primitive, non-qualitative individuality appears preferable to *PIIc* in the non-relativistic case. Things, however, are likely to be different as one moves to quantum field theory, where we can have *superpositions of particle number* and, consequently, countability cannot be expected to play the same role as in the case of non-relativistic quantum mechanics. And yet different conclusions might be in order when it comes to even more fundamental physical theories such as quantum gravity, string theory etc. The sort of pluralism that we have recommended takes all this into account, and makes room for different ontological perspectives to be applied at different levels and in different domains.

Having mentioned that in quantum field theory the lack of countability may suffice for not endorsing an ontology of individual objects, we are now in a position to add one further clarification. Of course, also in non-relativistic quantum mechanics one could uphold that particles really are modes of excitation of the underlying quantum field: after all, that might just be the right ontology for the domain in question. This is fine, but doesn't contradict our earlier claims here. For, it is important to see how exactly the alternative ontology is arrived at: several authors (e.g., Saunders (2006)) argued in favour of it on the basis that bosons are not discernible in any way in the non-relativistic context; this, however, is a move that is put into doubt by the results about weak discernibility (obtained among others by Saunders himself) that we discussed earlier. And if the conclusion that the right ontology is one of "modes of field excitations" is obtained via considerations that do not have to do with non-relativistic quantum mechanics, our point about this latter theory and what its formalism suggests remains intact (at least given our pluralist viewpoint).<sup>17</sup>

### ***Conclusions***

In this paper, we have argued against entrenched prejudices against primitivism about individuality, and in particular against the idea that a naturalistic approach to metaphysics inevitably leads to a Leibnizian-Quinean stance with respect to identity and individuality. Moreover, we have critically assessed a contextualist view that, in fact, amounts to a form of non-Leibnizian reductionism. In a case study dealing with non-relativistic quantum

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<sup>17</sup> We are grateful to an anonymous referee for pressing us on this point.

mechanics, we applied these general premises to make explicit certain assumptions that are customarily made in a tacit form in the literature and prove them unjustified. On this basis, we defended primitivism about the individuality of quantum particles. At a more general level, however, we recommended a more flexible sort of pluralism about identity and individuality, one that we regard as more in harmony with the actual relationship between the different sciences and their different domains of inquiry, and also between different theories and models in the same domain.

The proposed perspective enables one, among other things, to shed light on existing oppositions and conflicting views about the nature of individuals and the conditions of individuation of things. For instance, many authors, including historical figures such as, for example, Schrödinger, thought that quantum particles were *not* individuals. But this was, it seems, because they held the view of individuality captured by *PIIa* and *PIIb* as *generally and absolutely valid*. A similar presupposition, it seems, also underlies the current discussion about the ontology of quantum mechanics, which we looked at in some detail. However, if, as we have suggested, individuality is not a monolithic concept, then ‘how much individuality’ an object has can be meaningfully asked, and (objective and well-defined! We don’t think there is any room for conventionalism or relativism here) answers can and should be sought by having recourse to our best knowledge of the relevant field. This, however, without expecting, as it happened so far, one form of individuality and one correct criterion of individuation (either primitivism or reductionism) to be valid across all fields of knowledge.

The most important work to be done in the future is thus, as mentioned above, to test the whole set of available forms of individuality against the background of specific scientific theories. We think that – especially once Leibnizian or at any rate reductionist prejudices are set aside – this can be expected to produce a vast array of novel philosophical results.

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