

LEIBNIZ'S MISUNDERSTANDING OF NIZOLIUS'
 NOTION OF 'MULTITUDO'

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The Renaissance humanist Nizolius¹ is a remarkable exception in the history of philosophy, where the notion of class appears to be extremely rare². Nizolius substitutes traditional universals by what he calls *multitudines* and during more than four hundred pages he tries to convince his readers that in the real world there are only individuals and collections of individuals³. It is not perhaps clear whether Nizolius' *multitudo* comes closer to *class* or to *heap*⁴. General terms in the plural ("homines") designate, of course, the corresponding *multitudo*; in the singular number they designate *properly* one individual⁵, and *figuratively* the *multitudo* again⁶. We may understand "homo est animal" as having its two terms used in the figurative sense, but then what does the copula "est" mean? Talking in terms of modern logic we could say that the meaning of the copula should be class-inclusion and not class-membership. In fact Nizolius himself frequently stresses that "est" should be substituted by "est in"⁷. Now, it is extremely puzzling that Leibniz seems to have completely missed such a point of Nizolius' theory, because he erroneously thinks that Nizolius' approach leads to such absurdities as {homo}ε{animal}⁸ or to such falsities as {homo}={animal}⁹. How or why this could happen, is indeed quite enigmatic¹⁰. Leibniz's misunderstanding seems to concern not only a detail, but the very basic conception of the book he was editing for the second time, as is suggested by the fact that Leibniz's account of Nizolius' universals begins with a quite misleading formulation¹¹. Moreover Leibniz assigns to Nizolius' extensionalist view a "deduced" character¹² which it does not have: familiarity with Nizolius' work shows that the insight into universals as collections was something fundamental, a starting-point from which traditional logic and ontology had to be revised. Again, Leibniz suggests that Nizolius has "forgotten" that there is a *totum distributivum* besides individuals and classes¹³; but Nizolius knows quite well the traditional doctrine *de totis*¹⁴ and although he does not seem to give explicit rules for translating into his language sentences with quantifiers¹⁵ ("omnis", etc.), it is obvious that he preserves the notion of the *totum*