

POSSIBILITY, AGENCY, AND INDIVIDUALITY  
IN LEIBNIZ'S METAPHYSICS

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# POSSIBILITY, AGENCY, AND INDIVIDUALITY IN LEIBNIZ'S METAPHYSICS

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To my Parents

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## Abbreviations

- A *G. W. Leibniz: Sämtliche Schriften und Briefe*, Darmstadt/Leipzig/Berlin, Edition of the German Academy of Sciences 1923-, Cited by series, volume, and page. If not otherwise indicated, the reference is to series 6, volume 3.
- AG *G. W. Leibniz: Philosophical Essays*, D. Garber and R. Ariew (eds. and trans.) Indianapolis, Hackett, 1989.
- Arthur *G. W. Leibniz, The Labyrinth of the Continuum. Writings on the Continuum Problem, 1672-1686*, translated by R. Arthur, New Haven and London, Yale University Press, 2001.
- C *Opuscules et Fragments inédits de Leibniz*, L. Couturat (ed.), Paris, Olms, 1961.
- CCL *The Cambridge Companion to Leibniz*, N. Jolley, (ed.), Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1995.
- Confessio Sleigh, R. C., JR., (ed. and trans.), *Confessio philosophi, Papers Concerning the Problem of Evil, 1671-1678*, New Haven, Yale University Press, 2005.
- Ethics Baruch Spinoza, *Ethica*, Roman numerals indicate part; a: axiom; p: proposition; s: scholium, followed by Arabic numerals.
- FC *Nouvelles lettres et opuscules inédits de Leibniz*, A. Foucher de Careil, (ed.), Paris, August Durand, 1857; reprinted Hildesheim, Olms, 1971.
- GP *Die Philosophischen Schriften von G. W. Leibniz*, C. I. Gerhardt, (ed.), 7 vols. Berlin, Weidmann, 1875-90; reprinted Hildesheim, Olms, 1978.
- GM *Die mathematischen Schriften von G. W. Leibniz*, C. I. Gerhardt, (ed.), Berlin: Winter, 1860-1875.
- Grua *G. W. Leibniz: Textes inédits d'après les manuscrits de la Bibliothèque provinciale de Hanovre*, G. Grua, (ed.), Paris, 1948.
- L *G. W. Leibniz, Philosophical Papers and Letters*, translated by L. E. Loemker, 2<sup>nd</sup> edition, Dordrecht, Kluwer, 1969.
- LA *The Leibniz-Arnould Correspondence*, H. T., Mason, (ed. and trans.), Manchester, Manchester University Press, 1967.
- LR *G. W. Leibniz, Discours de métaphysique et correspondance avec Arnould*, George Le Roy, (ed.), Paris, Vrin, 1970.
- NE *G. W. Leibniz, Nouveaux essais sur l'entendement humain*, cited by book chapter and section, translated by P. Remnant and J. Bennett, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1981.

- PLP *G. W. Leibniz: Logical Papers*, Parkinson G. H. R. (trans. and ed.), Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1966.
- SR *G. W. Leibniz: De Summa Rerum: Metaphysical Papers 1675-1676*, (trans. and ed.), G. H. R. Parkinson, New Haven and London, Yale University Press, 1992.
- Theodicy *G. W. Leibniz: Essays on the Goodness of God the Freedom of Man and the Origin Evil*, (trans.), E. M. Huggard, La Salle, Illinois, Open Court, 1993, first published by Routledge & Kegan Paul, London, 1951.

# Introduction

Leibniz's notion of possibility is one of his most significant contributions to philosophy as well as one of the cornerstones of his metaphysics. This work attempts to bring out the intrinsic subtlety of Leibniz's approach to possibility and to explore some of its important repercussions in his metaphysics. This project involves an examination of some of the most difficult questions in Leibniz's metaphysics from this vantage point. The book consists of three parts, the first focusing on Leibniz's notion of possibility, the second on his notion of agency, and the third on his notion of individuality. Leibniz's preoccupation with the notions of possibility, agency and individuality is evident in his early writings as well as in his later ones. His combinatorial insights regarding the notion of possibility as a model for creating the world, his commitment to the traditional doctrine that activity constitutes being, and his view that individuals are the only true beings are among the formative and persisting tenets of his metaphysics. This work explores these tenets in some detail and seeks to highlight the connections between them.

The first part of the book presents Leibniz's approach to possibility by exposing his early presuppositions about the status and nature of possibilities (chapter 1); his notion of possible individuals (chapter 2); and his notion of possible worlds as constituted by the relations among possible individuals (chapters 3 and 4). The second part discusses the transition from possibility to actuality through the notion of agency. In chapter 5, I take up the question of actualization and divine agency. In chapter 6, I discuss the notions of moral agency and freedom of action in the human context. In chapter 7, I discuss the relation between agency and necessity in comparison to Spinoza who denies possibilities altogether. The third part discusses Leibniz's notion of nested, organic individuals in distinction from his notion of aggregates. In chapter 8, I discuss Leibniz's notion of aggregates and how their unity differs from that of genuine individuals. In chapter 9, I examine Leibniz's notion of nested individuals and their organic unity. In the final chapter I attempt to highlight the way in which Leibniz's notion of possible individuals helps clarifying the unity and simplicity of actual, nested individuals.

In drawing attention to the connections between possible individuals and actual ones through the notion of agency, I attempt to highlight a thread that runs through Leibniz's metaphysics – one which Leibniz himself for the most part presupposes but does not state. I present this thread – by no means the only thread that runs through Leibniz's metaphysics – by developing his definition of possible individuals and exploring some of the roles it plays in his metaphysics. I suggest that Leibniz defined a possible individual through a combinatorial rule that generates a unique and maximally consistent structure of predicates in God's understanding. Such a rule may be viewed as a program for action. I use this definition to clarify Leibniz's notion of actualization as endowing such a program with primitive force or power of action; his notion of moral agency and moral necessity by reflecting on the relation between the individual's concept and the agent realizing it; his distinction between individual substances and aggregates, and his notion of organic individuals, which have a nested structure to infinity. I conclude by arguing that Leibniz's definition of a possible individual as a program of action helps clarifying the type of unity he ascribes to a unique structure of nested individuals.

My choice of texts reflects the central role Leibniz's approach to possibility plays in his metaphysics. I present Leibniz's early presuppositions about possibility by focusing on his early texts and, in discussing other topics, I focus on texts in which Leibniz's views are either formative or very clearly expressed. While my main concern in this book is not a detailed and linear story of Leibniz's development, generally speaking, the book does progress (with some important exceptions) from his early to his later writings. The story of Leibniz's metaphysics I present here is not meant to be comprehensive. Rather, it starts with his suppositions about possibility and continues to examine central themes which are either interestingly related to it or which are intrinsically difficult and whose consideration against the context of his theory of possibility may contribute to our understanding of them (such as freedom and contingency, striving possibilities, unity of nested individuals). Some of chapters are also internally related (e.g., chapters 6 and 7, as well as 8 and 9) so that my discussion of the one motivates my discussion of the other. At the same time, the main conviction that informs the structure of this work is that there are intrinsic and interesting connections between Leibniz's logical theory of possible individuals and his theory of actual, organic ones.

In some more detail, the contents of each chapter are as follows. Chapter 1 presents the context in which Leibniz develops his approach to possibility. Leibniz's approach to the status of possibilities is situated

within the Platonic tradition in Christian philosophy. The Christian tradition reconciles the Platonic realm of eternal and immutable essences with its view of God as an active creator. It places the realm of ideal essences in the mind of God and sees these as exemplars of an ideal model for creation. Christian philosophy commonly viewed the formal model for the creation as thoughts in the creator's mind. Leibniz's view of possibility can be seen as a modification of this traditional model: he sees the individual exemplars not as some kind of entities but rather as logical possibilities, that is, as consistent thoughts in God's understanding that he may or may not realize.

Given this context, I examine how God's thinking (his mental activity) produces such possibilities. I argue that Leibniz understood this question in combinatorial terms. His insight is that the combinatorial nature of thinking produces possibilities as mental composition of simple constituents produces complex concepts. According to this view, God produces possible things by thinking the combinations among his simple forms, which Leibniz identifies with God's simple attributes. God's successive and reiterative combinatorial operations yield more complex forms, which are successively and indefinitely recombined, to yield diverse and infinite structures of predicates. God's combinatorial activity thus generates complex structures of predicates and each consistent structure of forms is deemed possible. On the basis of Leibniz's presuppositions about possibility, I examine his views of predication, truth, and his projects to construct a universal language and a real characteristics.

In chapter 2, I attempt to clarify how individual concepts or possible individuals are formed in the context of God's combinatorial activity. I suggest that Leibniz identified the concept of an individual with the combinatorial rule that generates a unique and maximally consistent structure of predicates in God's understanding. I term this rule the "production rule of the individual"—the method of producing a complex and unique structure of predicates by combining simple forms in God's understanding. The production rule unifies many predicates into one whole and constitutes the logical subject of an individual. While the production rule constitutes the individual's subject, the forms that make it up constitute its predicates. Such a rule corresponds to one of God's "modes" of intelligible activity. All the modes of God's activity that produce unique and consistent structures of predicates correspond to basic concepts of individuals. Since all concepts of individuals derive from God's simple forms and his combinatorial operations, they reflect God's essence and constitute the exemplars that are candidates for actualization. God's mental activity consists in reiterative reflection on the relations among its forms; it is neither temporal nor causal and no real production takes place—only mental composition in God's understanding.

Within this picture of possibility and the formation of individual concepts, I examine in chapter 3 how possible worlds are formed as compossible sets of individual concepts. This task involves Leibniz's view of relations. However, there seems to be a severe tension between Leibniz's commitments to a metaphysics of individuals and his use of relations among possible individuals as constitutive of a possible world. On the one hand, Leibniz's notion of compossibility among possible individuals presupposes relations between them. On the other hand, Leibniz believes that only individuals exist and that each individual has a concept so complete that all the truths about an individual, even such a truth as being compatible with other individuals, can be derived from the concept of that individual. I approach this tension by presenting it in the context of possibilities. In the context of possibilities in God's mind, relations have a natural place: relations among possible individuals arise as God considers several individuals at the same time. This view does not imply that relations exist or that they are properties of God. Rather, following Mugnai, I suggest that, for Leibniz, the ontological status of relations is not that of entities but of mental/logical co-considerations of various relata in the same thought or, as I prefer to call it, in the same logical space. Thus possibilities and relations have similar ontological status.

I note that Leibniz's view of relations formulated in his correspondence with Arnauld reveals an additional tension: while relations are required for the notion of possible worlds, such relations are also required to complete the individuation of concepts of individuals. I note that Leibniz's use of relations seems to conflict with his nominalism and his denial of the reality of relations. The resolution of this conflict, however, leads to a severe problem of circularity: on the one hand, Leibniz believes that inter-individual relations presuppose individuals, but, on the other hand, he uses such relations for the very individuation of individuals. I seek to resolve this circularity by using the notion of the "logical space of possibilities" and the individual's place within it. The individual's place within logical space is both constitutive of its concept and a relational notion. Due to Leibniz's view of relations, the concepts of individuals and the logical space turn out to be mutually constitutive notions, which points to a way out of the circularity.

Chapter 4 develops the suggestion that complete possible individuals and possible worlds are mutually constitutive by responding to an objection Catherine Wilson raises, namely, that worlds logically precede individuals. Wilson argues that the notion of a world conceptually precedes that of an individual substance. Instead of a world produced by

conjoining individuals, Wilson suggests that individuals are produced by breaking down an already complete world. My response to this argument leads to the conclusion that we can avoid the question of whether individuals precede worlds or vice versa since we can take the position, which I favor, that these notions are mutually constitutive. I suggest that possible worlds are formed at the moment that the relations between incomplete concepts of individuals are considered. It is only at this moment that the complete concepts of individuals, as well as of worlds, are formed in God's mind. In the second part of the chapter, I extend my reconstruction of Leibniz's position to the role that relations play in individuation. In light of the distinction between complete and incomplete concepts, I consider two recent approaches (those of Cover and O'Leary-Hawthorne (1999) and Mugnai (2001)) to the role of relations in individuation. According to Cover and O'Leary-Hawthorne, relations play no metaphysical role in individuation; according to Mugnai, they play an essential role. I argue that Leibniz's mature view of individuation is a reconciliation of these positions.

Chapter 5 takes up the question of actualization. I consider the actualization of a possible world in terms of the actualization of possible individuals. As I argued in chapter 2, a possible individual is partly defined by the rule of activity that produces a unique structure of predicates in God's mind. The production rule thus defines the essence of an individual and constitutes its logical subject. Such a notion of a possible individual may be seen as a unique program of action, that is, a course of action that God conceives in his mind. A Leibnizian actual individual, however, acts on its own – it is a spontaneous agent. To become an active agent, a possible individual needs power of action. I suggest, therefore, that actualization involves endowing a rule of action with primitive power of action. A program for action and power of action yield an active agent who has a unique course of action. Upon creation, the agent's activity, implemented according to its rule, produces the sequence of predicates prescribed by the production rule.

The agent's production rule thus regulates its development and unifies its various states from within. The agent's activity, according to its production rule, renders it a self-sufficient individual substance. Whereas the intelligible activity in God's mind is atemporal and immutable, the activity of actual individuals involves change. The intelligible activity in God's mind produces possible individuals, while the activity of created minds realizes (some of) these possibilities in the world. Thus the transition from possible individuals to actual ones can be understood against the background of the Platonic contrast between the realm of Being and that of becoming.

Chapter 6 examines the tension between Leibniz's definition of the individual by a complete concept and his insistence that rational individuals act freely – what Leibniz calls the labyrinth of human freedom. In light of the view of possible individuals presented in chapter 2, and in light of the view of actualization presented in chapter 5, I suggest a prescriptive reading of the individual's concept as an explication of Leibniz's notion of moral necessity. My approach is based on a distinction between descriptive and prescriptive aspects of Leibniz's notion of the complete concept as well as on the distinction between concepts and actions. A complete concept may be seen as a comprehensive picture of the individual's activities and properties and it may also be seen as prescribing the reasons for the individual's course of action. In this way, the reasons may be seen as intrinsic to the individual's concept while there remains a logical possibility that they would not be the *causes* of the individual's actions. This reading may help clarify Leibniz's distinction between necessary and intrinsic predicates as well as his claim that reasons “incline” the rational individual's actions without necessitating them. The prescriptive reading I develop helps to explicate Leibniz's notions of contingency and moral necessity and shows that the notions of possibility and agency, and particularly the notion of rational agency, play a significant role in his insistence on human freedom.

Chapter 7 contrasts the views of Leibniz and Spinoza. According to Leibniz, rational agency presupposes contingency or logically possible alternatives. Spinoza, however, holds that the notion of contingency merely attests to human ignorance and delusion regarding the truly necessary course of events (e.g., Ethics I p 29). He famously writes that, “a thing is called contingent only with regard to a defect in our knowledge” (Ethics I p 33 s2). Since Spinoza denies contingency, his metaphysics offers a very interesting context in which to examine a notion of agency as separated from the notion of possibility—that is, a context in which agency is strongly related to necessity.

I examine the relation between activity and necessity in Spinoza against the background of Descartes' mechanistic view of *res extensa* and I outline an interpretative approach according to which, for Spinoza, God's activity is constitutive of his essence, rather than entailed by it independently of his activity. This approach depends on a generative notion of essences and concepts, common to both Spinoza and Leibniz (but much more explicit in Leibniz). I suggest that the use of generative definitions may make clearer the relation between activity and necessity in Spinoza and that Leibniz's extensive use of generative definitions lends support to the central role agency plays in his view of substance as well as to the intrinsic relations he conceives between the notions of possibility, agency and individuality.

Chapter 8 focuses on Leibniz's notion of aggregates and their distinction from individual substances. In contrast to Descartes, Leibniz describes extended bodies as at once *semirealia* and *semimentalia*. Such bodies differ from true beings (individual substances) as well as from *mere* phenomena. They occupy a curious middle position between true beings and fictions and are aptly termed "well-founded phenomena". In effect, such extended bodies are aggregates of non-extended substances. In applying Leibniz's view of relations presented in chapter 3, I suggest that Leibniz's notion of aggregate presupposes a mental/logical operation through which many substances are united. While the unity of the aggregate derives from a mind performing the operation, its reality is grounded in real substances. Thus, according to Leibniz, extension is understood as a relational property that presupposes a uniting operation of the *relata*. I argue that this extent of mind-dependence does not imply an anti-materialist (or entirely idealist) view of material bodies. Rather, it requires that claims about material bodies will be seen as involving relations among substances and a mind perceiving these relations. I conclude that the status of aggregates as well-founded phenomena derives primarily from their relational and external unity. By contrast, individual substances have internal (substantial) unity. In effect, this difference is strongly related to a range of features that also serves to distinguish organic from non-organic beings.

In contrast to aggregates, true beings, which Leibniz identifies with individuals, are characterized by their substantial (i.e., enduring and necessary) unity. Among Leibniz's paradigmatic examples of individual substances are organic unities such as animals and plants. It is remarkable, however, that, in Leibniz's view, such organic unities consist of other individual substances nested within them. Thus chapter 9 examines Leibniz's notion of nested individuals and their unity, which is characteristic of organic units alone. As it turns out, this structure of creatures nested within creatures typifies the Leibnizian notion of individuality, so that nested individuals turn out to be the constituents of other individuals. This radical and fascinating model of individuality contrasts with most of the traditional models (starting from Aristotle's) as well as with contemporary models of individuality and involves some severe difficulties.

Since Leibniz defines substances as true units and as self-sufficient, it is not at all clear what makes such an ensemble of creatures, nested within each other, *one* substance. In other words, it is not at all clear what distinguishes the supposed unity of substances from the lack of unity in aggregates – which also comprise a plurality of true units. I suggest we approach this difficult question by examining the precise sense in which

Leibniz employs the notions unity and nestedness. Following a remark by Ishiguro, I suggest that the unity in question is not the cohesiveness of parts or (primarily) that of spatio-temporal unity but rather the unity of agency. It is a unity deriving from activation in the sense of functional organization that gives unity to the substance. Thus, a living being is united by virtue of a single principle of functional organization that also orders its activity in accordance with a certain end.

In chapter 10, the insights from Leibniz's view of possibility are used to further clarify his notion of nested individuality. In particular, the observations on how a possible individual is formed in God's mind are used to illuminate the simplicity and infinite structure of nested individuals. I suggest that the structure of individuals nested one within another is consistent with the notion of a possible individual presented in chapters 2 and 3. Like an algorithm, the production rule generating a unique structure of predicates in God's mind may include many nested sub-rules as constitutive components. If a "divine combinatorics" gives rise to concepts of individuals through the notion of a production-rule for unifying and ordering predicates, it may also be used to explain the relation of functional organization and domination between an individual substance and the individual substances nested in it. In this way, the production rule may be used to account for the unity as well as the simplicity of nested individuals. Thus Leibniz's views of possibility and actuality are not only intrinsically connected but may also be used to shed light on each other.