

A Polemic Against Those Who Assert World-Bound Individuals in Leibniz's Philosophy

Joshua Henry Smith

The German philosopher, Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz, wrote his first philosophical work at the tender age of seventeen and died at the age of seventy. Leibniz was able to write much in terms of both quantity and quality. His ideas were on significant and difficult subjects, ranging from philosophy, to mathematics, to physics, and engineering. Because he wrote so much and over such a very long period of time, there is much to be reconciled and understood in Leibniz's philosophy. A sort of rectification should take place, a cohesion of thought between his seemingly disparate ideas. I will present one such tension in Leibniz's philosophical writings that requires said careful attention. The tension comes via Leibniz's thoughts on the individual and freedom.

Leibniz believes the individual to be properly understood in the context of what he calls its complete concept. The complete individual concept stems from Leibniz's adherence to two different principles. The predicate in subject principle, which asserts that predicates are found within the subject. This means that the subject determines the predicates it will have based on its simply being. This principle in turn relies upon the second principle of sufficient reason. The principle of sufficient reason states that everything that exists must have sufficient reason for doing so. One must be able to answer the question of why something is the way it is as opposed to some other way. If the predicate in subject principle is connected with the principle of sufficient reason and applied to individuals then the result is the complete individual concept.

This concept, which constitutes the individual, contains everything: everything that has happened, that will happen, and that is happening. An individual's properties are found in the concept that constitutes the individual, (predicate in subject principle), and are rationally deduced from said concept (principal of sufficient reason).

To illustrate this, Leibniz in "On Contingency" states: "It is certain that there is a connection between subject and predicate in every truth. Therefore, when one says, 'Adam who sins exists,' it is necessary that there be something in this possible notion, 'Adam who sins,' by virtue of which he is said to exist."¹ The subject, Adam, contains within his complete concept the predicate of sinning. Sinning is therefore a part of Adam's identity, a part of what it means to be Adam. In changing one of the deducible properties, i.e. sinning, this means you would have to change all of the properties that come to be deduced from that property and you would be altering the process of reasoning that occurred to produce that property in the first place. Before, you had a logical deduction of properties guided by the principle of sufficient reason. Now that you have a new property, a different set of deductions must take place in order for that new property to become manifest, a process that involves the entirety of the complete concept.

This leads to a universe wherein everything is connected, in one way or another. Leibniz waxes poetic when he says that each person is a mirror which represents the universe from their own unique perspective. He also states, "The present is pregnant with the future; the future can be read in the past; the distant is expressed in the proximate."² Thus, the complete concept of an individual will include a unique mirroring of an

¹ G.W. Leibniz, *Philosophical Essays*, trans. Roger Ariew and Daniel Garber. (Indianapolis, Indiana: Hackett Publishing Company, 1989), 29.

² Leibniz, *Philosophical Essays*, 211

interconnected universe with all of its past and future states.

The super-essentialist reading of Leibniz that I will be arguing against latches onto this idea that all of the predicates are found within the complete individual concept. They assert that if one were somehow able to change even one of the properties found in an individual's complete concept, then the very essence of that individual would change. To cast a wide net over the whole of Leibnizian scholarship, this has come to be the prevailing view. The thesis of this essay is that this prevailing view has misunderstood certain parts of Leibniz's philosophy and has been uncharitable to others, declaring that Leibniz was not entitled to the things he said on freedom.

I shall first dive into the position that I am arguing against. I will be using Fabrizio Mondadori and the ideas that he has expressed in his essay titled *Leibniz and the Doctrine of Interworld Identity* as representative of the super-essentialist position. Mondadori writes:

"[T]he complete concept exemplified by a given individual is nothing other than the latter's nature or essence. This, in conjunction with Leibniz's claim that from a given complete concept one can somehow deduce all of the properties of the individual exemplifying it, leads to what I have called "super-essentialism": the view, namely, that all of a given individual's properties are essential to him."³

This simple explanation gets complicated, however, when Mondadori dives further into the complete concept theory for individuals. He asserts that the complete concept is not to be considered a set of all the properties that the

³ Fabrizio Mondadori, "Leibniz and the Doctrine of Inter-world Identity." *Studia Leibnitiana* Bd.7, H. 1 (1975): 31, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/40693759>

individual expresses, but rather as a core set of properties from which all of the other properties will be deduced. Mondadori argues that this core set of properties makes up the essence of the individual, for in these two separate passages he states:

"Leibniz definitely rejected the view that a complete concept is made up of all of the properties possessed by the individual exemplifying it. His view, rather, was that a complete concept is to be identified with a core set of properties ... from which all of the (remaining) properties of the individual in question can somehow be deduced."⁴

"This core set of properties, I have argued, is according to Leibniz one and the same thing as the nature or essence of the individual exemplifying it in the actual world."⁵

Mondadori continues on to try and show that Leibniz himself believed that if one property were to be changed then the same individual would not persist through such an alteration. This, Mondadori believes, is due to the rational deduction that occurs, tying in the principle of sufficient reason. Changing one of the deducible properties would alter all of the properties that came to be deduced from that property and would disturb the process of reasonable relationships that inevitably lead to the manifestation of that property in the first place. Thus, one would be changing the core properties in order to produce this new property, and so, the essence of the individual will have changed. If the essence of the individual changes, then you no longer have the same individual. Mondadori concludes the section saying, "In a word: change one of the 'consequences' of the concept,

⁴ Mondadori, "Doctrine of Inter-world Identity," 22.

⁵ Mondadori, "Doctrine of Inter-world Identity," 23.

and you have to change the concept itself; but if you change the concept then ... you will end up with a different individual than the individual who exemplified the original concept.”⁶

Freedom

Directly tied into this debate is Leibniz’s conception of freedom for the individual. If actions undertaken are to be considered properties of an individual, and if all of an individual’s properties are essential to that individual i.e. nothing can be other than what it is, then in what sense does the individual have freedom?

Leibniz believes freedom to be found in the realm of possibility or rather in the fact that things could have been otherwise. This is what pulls him back from the precipice of determinism. This ‘possibility’ exists in the mind of God, where before creation, God surveyed the infinite possibilities of different instantiations of worlds and individuals. The super-essentialist denies this possibility of inter-world identity however, for they say that individuals are world bound and that although there may be possibility with regards to different worlds, there is no possibility of having individuals cross over between these different worlds. There are no infinitely many structures that become increasingly complex as God decides which combinations of different simple forms should be put together. They believe that there is only one individual that has specific predicates that are directly derived from their core properties. This individual cannot increase or decrease in complexity, gain or lose predicates. Therefore, super-essentialism is the groundwork upon which inter-world identity is denied and world-bound individuals are posited. So, if I am to assert that inter-world identity is possible within the philosophical framework of Leibniz, then it is this interpretation of Leibniz by Mondadori that I

6 Mondadori, “Doctrine of Inter-world Identity,” 24-25.

must overcome. The difficult part is that in denying the super-essentialist interpretation I seem to have to deny Leibniz's predicate in subject principle. If I want to assert that there is a degree of spontaneity that can occur within the confines of Leibnizean philosophy, then it seems that I have to reject the idea that the predicate of 'sinning' adheres logically or rationally to the subject of Adam.

Core Properties

And so, in order to assert inter-world identity without rejecting Leibniz's predicate in subject principle I shall look to the core properties. I shall show that the core properties can be separated from the deducible properties because the core properties are what constitute the individual essentially. In opposition, for super-essentialism to stand, it must show that both the core properties and the deducible properties are essential. Mondadori is frustratingly vague about the distinction between core properties and deducible properties, but the answer seems to reveal itself in section five where he discusses essences and accidents.

I shall now quote Mondadori here at length:

"[A]n essential property is according to Leibniz one which is somehow associated with the species to which the individual possessing it belongs (thus, for example, being a member of the species homo sapiens is one such property), or else one which in some sense "follows" from a property of the former type (thus, for example, being capable of thought is according to Leibniz one such property)."⁷

So one's core properties are only those properties which are necessary; properties that are identical in the sense of

⁷ Mondadori, "Doctrine of Inter-world Identity," 50.

A=A. Mondadori is saying that the core properties must denote that which is essential to our understanding of the individual and vice versa. But what does Leibniz have to say about these core properties? I will now quote Leibniz in his correspondence with Arnauld. He writes, “[I]n speaking of several Adams I do not take Adam for a determined individual but for a certain person conceived sub ratione generalitatis under the circumstances which appear to us to determine Adam as an individual but which do not actually determine him sufficiently.”⁸ Here Leibniz is describing an individual as a general understanding of that individual; enough to differentiate the individual from others, but not enough to determine the individual in its fullest sense, as in, with the type of complete concept found in the created world. This is exactly the type of individual that is required for inter-world identity: where the the core properties are enough to define an individual, but which are not so specific as to completely determine the individual. The essential, core properties are those that allow Leibniz to conceive of a person generally, whereas the derived properties are those that come about in the actual Adam, not in the infinity of possible Adams.

Laws and Complete Concepts

But, if I am correct in my assertion that inter-world identity is possible, then I cannot just show that there is a qualitative difference between core and derivable properties, I must also rectify the notion that the laws of any given possible world are essential to that individual's essence. For if the specific laws of a single possible world are essential to the essence of an individual, then my argument for inter-world identity falls apart because the

⁸ G.W. Leibniz, *Discourse on Metaphysics, Correspondence with Arnauld, Monadology*, trans. George Montgomery (La Salle, Illinois: Open Court Publishing Company, 1997), 128-129.

laws determine what properties are derived from the core properties. The laws determine the derived properties, so if the laws are essential to the individual, then they bring into the essentialness of the individual the derived properties as well. I shall argue that it is only after the individual has been realized in the actualized world that the laws of that world may enter into the complete individual concept.

Unsurprisingly, Mondadori resists the idea that the laws of a world are not tied up with the essence of the individual.

"[T]he laws must therefore be (partly) constitutive of the essence or nature of the given individual. Or more generally: the laws must be (partly) constitutive of the essence or nature (i.e. concept) of the world to which that individual belongs, and hence also of the essence or nature of the individual in question (since for Leibniz a possible world is a set of compossible complete concepts)."⁹

I ultimately agree that the laws of a particular world are inherently tied up with the individual of said world, for it is the laws of the world that help to determine the properties that will be deduced from the core set of properties. Therefore, in one sense, the laws are tied into the complete concept of every individual. But in another, more essential sense, I cannot assent to Mondadori's position. I do not agree that the laws are tied up with the core principles (essence) of the individual. My disinclination to Mondadori's position stems from not just this passage that I am about to quote but also from many others that are like it. Leibniz, in his correspondence with Arnauld states:

⁹ Mondadori, "Doctrine of Inter-world Identity," 37.

“Now, what is it to say that the predicate is in the subject if not that the concept of the predicate is found in some sort involved in the concept of the subject? Since from the very time that I began to exist it could be said of me truly that this or that would happen to me. What must be granted is that these predicates were principles involved in the subject or in my complete concept, which constitutes the so-called me, and which is the basis of the interconnection of all my different states.”¹⁰

It would be easy to brush this off as supporting a super-essentialist point of view. However, I would direct one’s attention to the beginning of the second sentence where Leibniz states, “Since from the very time that I began to exist...” It is only once Leibniz began to exist in this particular universe that everything that will happen to him was set in motion. The predicate in subject principle, the basis of super-essentialism, only applies once an individual is said properly to exist. Not before. God, in his infinite wisdom, surveys the infinite possibilities that can occur and picks out this world, this best of all possible worlds. Many other worlds were possible wherein different properties were associated with the individuals inserted into them. But God chose this one, with this group of individuals with these properties, because he knows all and was able to see that this world was best. There are many quotes from the correspondence that seem to support a super-essentialist interpretation of Leibniz, but they are all predicated on the fact that the individual already exists, and as such, has a complete concept that includes the laws of this universe that they were realized in. But the individuals that I am referring to when I assert inter-world identity are still only pure possibility. They do not exist and that is why they are

¹⁰ Leibniz, Correspondence, 113.

capable of being inserted into any number of possible worlds and still remain essentially themselves.

A Return to Freedom and Possibility

Now that inter-world identity has been established, Leibniz's conception of freedom as being predicated upon possibility is also saved. Leibniz's freedom hinged on possibility and the existence of other possible worlds wherein different properties were associated with the same individual. Freedom stemmed from the fact that things could have been otherwise. The possibility existed of a world wherein Adam did not sin, or Caesar did not cross the Rubicon, and Judas was not damned. Therefore, Leibniz was entitled to what he said regarding human freedom because inter-world identity can be upheld. World-bound individuals and super-essentialism take too much away from Leibniz's philosophy and do not sufficiently investigate the notion of complete concepts. This is why inter-world identity should be upheld to the detriment of super-essentialism.

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