THE STRUCTURE OF LEIBNIZIAN POSSIBLE WORLDS

This paper concerns the structure of Leibnizian possible worlds and the order of conceptual priority between possible worlds and possible substances. I use textual evidence to develop an alternative to the received view on these matters. One advantage for my account is that it circumvents apparent difficulties facing Leibniz’s theory of compossibility, but the account is also of interest in its own right, since it seems to have been overlooked by interpreters so far.

According to the received view, which I’ll call the substances-first view, possible worlds result from possible substances through a combinatorial process in the divine mind. God first conceives of all possible substances and then conceives of the ways that they can be combined into possible worlds. Distinct possible worlds emerge from this process because not all possible are compossible; i.e., not just any possible substance can coexist with just any other. What the relationship of compossibility is, and whether Leibniz can formulate a philosophically coherent account of it, have proven to be difficult questions for Leibniz’s interpreters.

But Leibniz also articulated a very different account of the structure of possible worlds, which to my knowledge has not received any attention as a competitor to the substances-first view. I’ll call it the laws-first view. Its clearest statement is found in Leibniz’s correspondence with Arnauld, but a good deal of evidence is also found in other texts, both from the same period and later in Leibniz’s career.

According to the laws-first view, each possible world corresponds to a set of laws of the general order. These general laws determine the laws of nature or subordinate maxims for that world, i.e., the psychological and physical laws. The laws of nature determine the individual substances themselves. For example, in the actual world, Caesar’s decision to cross the Rubicon is determined by the psychological law that human beings choose the apparent best.

But it is not just that the general laws pick out substances from a pre-existing stock in the divine mind. Instead, God forms his concepts of possible individuals in virtue of knowing what will result from his enacting given sets of laws. So God conceives of a given individual substance in virtue of conceiving of the laws of the world to which it belongs. The substances are thus not conceptually prior to the general laws. This is clear from the way that Leibniz relies on the laws-first view in order to explain why substances’ concepts bear connections to one another. He claims that substances in a given world bear conceptual connections because they depend on the same set of laws.

It is important to distinguish the laws-first view from so-called lawful accounts of compossibility. The substances-first view needs an account of compossibility in order to separate individuals into different possible worlds. Lawful accounts of compossibility say that substances are compossible just in case they are can be combined under some set of laws.
or other. In contrast, the laws-first view denies that worlds result from the combination of substances at all, and it denies that the individual substances are conceptually prior to the laws of their worlds.

This avoids the problem of compossibility because, on the laws-first view, God’s creative decision consists in selecting a set of general laws rather than selecting a set of substances. God need never attempt to co-create individuals from different worlds. He only needs to decide which set of laws will bring about the best world. If God enacts the laws of our world, the substances of our world will exist. If God had enacted the laws of some other world, then different substances would exist.