

Reply to Stefano Di Bella

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I am most grateful to Stefano Di Bella for his very perceptive reading of my book. Di Bella's review is not only accurate and balanced but also captures some of the non-written thoughts and hesitations of its author. His critical remarks and his call for further attention to some of Leibniz's texts are well taken. I especially appreciate the critical spirit of his review for the point of publication can only be to subject one's work to careful examination. One can only hope to be read and criticized by a careful and competent reviewer as Di Bella. Di Bella's review calls for some clarifications, which I shall attempt below. His review also made me see something that I didn't see as clearly in writing the book, and hence have not expressed as clearly as I should have. This point concerns Di Bella's outline of my project as "a combinatorial reconstruction of the world." Di Bella describes my project in these words:

The construction of a world out of the material of simple concepts (or 'forms') is usually taken by interpreters as little more than a program (if not a dream), whose realization has proven to be far from a linear one. Nachtomy's book, on the contrary, tries to take the idea seriously; it outlines, indeed, a complete reconstruction of Leibniz's metaphysics from the bottom up - 'synthetically', we might say - i.e. from the material of *possibilia* in God's mind up to individual concepts/substances and further on to the world of bodies. Nachtomy is well aware of the different ontological levels and the crucial steps (if not gaps) one comes across when moving from one to another. He engages himself, however, in a basically continuistic interpretation, providing a rationale for all controversial steps (underline is mine).

Most of this description is right on. I do have some slight reservations about some points of detail. But there is one central point that I'd like to bring out in this reply. My account is indeed continuous (and even bottom-up) in that it attempts to trace the construction of all possible individuals and worlds in God's mind from basic elements. It proceeds to describe how possible things are actualized and how the divine mental construction of possible things in God's mind bears on their realization as the individual substances that make up the actual world (and it bears a great deal, I think). At the same time, my account points – or at least should have done so more clearly – to a major point of discontinuity or, better, rupture. I

do not think (nor do I ever say in the book) that the *actual* world gets constructed. Thus, strictly speaking, I do not advocate a linear construction of the actual world from simple elements. To be sure, construction is the main theme of the first part of my book. But let me stress as clearly as I am able to that it is a construction of *possible* things, not of actual ones. While possible individuals are composed of simple elements, actual individuals are not such compositional products. Rather, they are created as complete wholes.

I think that this observation provides a central insight into Leibniz's metaphysics. That is, once possible individuals are conceived as complete concepts in God's mind, God chooses some of them to be created. But the logic of *creation* is not one of construction. This marks a decisive rupture in Leibniz's metaphysics between possible things (seen as complete concepts) and actual things (seen as individual substances or agents). The story of the transition from the realm of *possibilia* to that of *actualia* is indeed continuous. But, as I understand it, when it comes to actualization, the story is no longer told in compositional terms. If my book has not made out this difference clearly enough, I wish to take the opportunity to do so here.

Di Bella notes that I am "well aware of the different ontological levels and the crucial steps one comes across when moving from one to another." I hope he takes this to apply to the rupture between the composition of possibles and the creation of actuals. Yet his conjoining concepts with substances ("concepts/substances"), as well as his phrase that the *world* is constructed from simple elements urge me to stress this crucial difference – for it is a difference that has enormous consequences on how we reconstruct Leibniz's metaphysics. This is why I am slightly uneasy about Di Bella's rendition of my project as the "*The metaphysical Aufbau of our world*". I would not be so alarmed if it would refer to the construction of a *possible* world or better the construction of all possible worlds. For, indeed, in the conceptual realm of *possibilia*, 'located' in the (conceptualist) domain of God's understanding, mental construction of all possibilities and relations is indeed the name of the game (at least as I see it and describe in the book). But once we arrive to the context of actualization (in the second part of the book), the model of construction actually gets inversed. Individual substances are created as complete units; they are not made up piece wise out of parts. And, for this reason, they cannot be decomposed or divided into parts, as Leibniz frequently stresses in his later writings. Instead, they are seen as indivisible simple units, which lack parts. In my view, this is strongly related to the definition of created substances as agents, that is, to the individual

substances having primitive force as one of their constitutive features (and also why I call the second part Agency).

Unlike material bodies or other compositional products, active agents cannot be decomposed. The main reason here is that they are not composed in the first place. That doesn't mean, of course, however counter-intuitive it may seem at first, that they do not admit of infinitely many properties or even infinitely many other individuals nested in them. They do have infinitely many properties or predicates, which may be ascribed to them and which in fact cannot be taken a part from them. This is a formidable tension, which I formulate and attempt to resolve in the last chapters of the book. It can be approached, I think, and Di Bella agrees, by defining individuals through an infinite law of production conjoined with primitive power of action (which accounts for their creation). Actualization renders them active and indestructible units. They are no longer seen as mere compositional thoughts in God's mind but as active agents. Yet this inverts the relation between constituents and wholes in the context of concepts, as distinct from the context of created agents.

As I am well aware, this goes against a prevalent interpretation of Leibnizian corporeal substances as being composed of simple spiritual atoms. This is partly why I stress this point. While there are certainly Leibnizian texts that suggest as much, in my view, existing substances are not united by composition but rather through the activity of a dominating rule or a program, assigning each one of them a function within the whole. But here, I am afraid that I begin to go beyond the appropriate limits of a reply. So let me just address two other important points in Di Bella's review.

1. Di Bella makes some critical remarks in his discussion of the distinctions between monadic and relational predicates, and thin and thick individual concepts. He writes:

Nachtomy's main contribution here is the interesting and suggestive introduction of the notion of 'logical space', where each possible individual is located. I am not fully clear, however, about the relation between this suggestion and the distinction above: that is to say, does the logical space already determine the place of the *incomplete* possible individual, or is it constituted only at the second step? The question is relevant, especially as far as the notion of 'space' is taken in its full import, i.e. as a framework which is not only determined by, but essentially determines each of its contents. And this is the crucial point, finally, in order to appreciate the relevance of the distinction at hand: I mean,

in order to know exactly how the thin and the thick concepts are related. Given the limited space here, I doubt that I can provide a better answer to Di Bella's question other than refer the reader to the formulation Di Bella himself provides at the end of the previous paragraph, which seems to me accurate and concise. Let me just clarify that there is some asymmetry in the order of determination. Thick individual concepts clearly depend on the thin ones as relational predicates depend on monadic ones. But that does not go the other way around. Thin concepts do not depend on thick ones, at least at the very basic level of description. So, how is the distinction related to the notion of logical space? If one considers each thin individual separately, there is no logical space. If one considers them all together by comparing and considering how they are related to one another, one gets the logical space. In this picture, properties such as size are determined in reference to the place of a thin individual within logical space, that is, the individual's place among all others. But in considering its place (which is clearly relational) the thin individual becomes thick (with relations, we might add). It is worth noting however that intra-relational predicates may arise just from the consideration of one thin individual concept by considering the (intra)relations among them. Consider a simplified example of numerical space that I mention in the book. Can we think of i, ii, and iii, (take them literally as strokes) independently of one another? I think so, at least as a subtraction of some relational notions. But once we consider them together, we can get a numerical order, in which each one of them has a well-defined place. Do we have this notion of place independently of its relation to the whole space? I think not. Thus, saying that 'iii' is bigger than 'ii' makes sense only in the context of some logical space or, in other words, by considering some of the relations between them.

Di Bella also questions the pertinence of the distinction between the monadic and relational predicates on the following grounds. He writes:

The quotation [from Mugnai] calls attention to a crucial test for measuring the adequacy of an account of Leibniz's view about relations. All interpreters who have insisted on the thin/thick distinction, indeed, reason as if the relational properties of a substance S 'supervene' or 'result' by comparing S to other individuals, S *remaining unchanged in itself*. Also Nachtomy's efficacious example of the three letters assumes that the change in the relational properties of one of these letters could happen without any internal change, according to a venerable tradition in the philosophy of relations.

This is not Leibniz's view, however. As is well-known (but not so often taken

seriously), indeed, he expressly says that an observer acute enough could read off *from one individual only* the *whole* world to which it belongs.

In the book, I refer to this wonderful and classical text: “When someone, by growing, becomes bigger than me, then some change occurs in me as well, since a denomination of mine is changed. In this way, all things are in a way contained in all things” (Pk 85).

Here is a real example. My son has recently become taller than me. I am no longer the tallest in our family. He is. Did I become shorter? Well, it feels that way, but I didn’t. Now, while I may not know how to describe the monadic predicates accounting for this change, I suppose there are such properties, surely in him. I don’t see why Di Bella thinks that the distinction (between monadic and relational predicates) somehow plays down Leibniz’s holistic picture of relations. On the contrary, it seems to me that it only stresses how we are all connected by virtue of our relations to all others. At the same time, in order to make sense of relations, we have to suppose some *relata*. And, given Leibniz’s notion of natural order, at some level of analysis one expects to find monadic predicates.

I take it that, by “an observer acute enough” Leibniz alludes to God’s infinite power of perception. For this reason, I fail to see the force of the objection. On my view, reading off from one individual the whole world is possible precisely because of the strong connection between individuals and worlds, so that seeing through the concept of one individual in fact implies seeing all the other individuals with which it is related (and particularly all the other individuals with which it is compossible). So, on my reading, this does not seem to be an objection.

I fully endorse Di Bella’s distinction between the ontological perspective and conceptual one (pp. 146-47). It seems to be utterly consistent with my view. To his objection that “the important distinction to be drawn would rather be, once again, that between the individual and his/her concept – and the related one between ontological inherence on one hand, and conceptual inclusion on the other,” I reply that it depends on the context we are considering. As he accurately notes, I use the distinction to “give an account of the construction of possible worlds in God’s mind.” In this context, the distinction between the individual and its concept is irrelevant because there are no individuals but only concepts of them (or divine conceptions of them). In considering the context of concrete things, sure, I accept Di Bella’s point. It seems to me that there need not be *the* important distinction but rather several. The task of the careful interpreter is to give each distinction the appropriate role and weight at the context in question.

2. Di Bella notes that my suggestion for a prescriptive reading of Leibniz's complete concept as prescribing the reasons for the individual's conduct is "less convincing". I agree. The question is whether we have a more convincing account of Leibniz's insistence on human freedom and contingency. I am not sure. Let me restate what I say at the end of this chapter (6):

I have introduced the prescriptive interpretation ... as an attempt to account for Leibniz's insistence that human individual freedom of action is compatible with its having a complete concept. While I have some doubts whether this interpretation works, I have no doubt that it is worth considering in exploring the Leibnizian labyrinth of human freedom.

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