

BOOK REVIEWS

Leibniz and Arnauld; A Commentary on their Correspondence, by R. C. Sleight, Jr. New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1990, xvi + 237 pp. Reviewed by Benson Mates, University of California at Berkeley.

Leibniz's correspondence with the noted French Jansenist, Antoine Arnauld, is, all things considered, our best single source for understanding the intricacies of Leibnizian metaphysics. Accordingly, Professor Sleight has made a particularly valuable contribution to Leibniz scholarship by producing, with his customary acuity and thoroughness, a deep study of this correspondence. Heretofore Arnauld's part of the correspondence has for the most part been skipped over as merely a sort of punctuation in the Leibnizian texts. Sleight's full treatment, among its many other virtues, shows that the correspondence was a genuine dialogue between two very worthy adversaries, and in the process it throws new light on the views of both of them.

Within the limited space here it is not possible to take explicit notice of even the highlights of the wealth of information and insightful interpretation with which the book is packed. Consequently, on the hypothesis that readers will probably be most interested in matters that are controversial, I shall restrict my comments to two interrelated topics upon which Professor Sleight's understanding of Leibniz seems to differ substantially from my own. These concern complete individual concepts and so-called "superessentialism".

Most commentators have supposed

that with each possible individual substance Leibniz associates exactly one "complete individual concept", which contains every attribute that individual would have if it existed. It has been supposed further that, in view of what Leibniz calls "the universal interconnection of things", together with his notion of identity and his doctrine that all relations (including that of co-existence) are grounded in attributes of the relata, he must regard each possible individual as belonging to exactly one possible world. And from these and other indications it has been concluded by some of us that, for Leibniz, every attribute of every actual individual is "essential", in the sense that it is absolutely impossible that that individual should have existed without having that attribute. I shall not rehearse the evidence for these suppositions and the "superessentialist" conclusion, as it is easily accessible in the literature.

In contrast to this, Professor Sleight suggests (51) that, for each possible individual and each possible world containing that individual, there is a complete individual concept containing all the attributes that individual would have if that possible world were actual. He points out that this, unlike the other interpretation, does not exclude the possibility that the same possible individual could belong to more than one possible world, and, in particular, that an actual individual should have had attributes other than the ones it does have.

Now in considering the ins and outs of this matter it helps, I think, to follow Sleight's lead (55) in "emphasizing the theological setting of the *Discourse* and

correspondence, and the light that setting sheds on the meaning and justification of various of Leibniz's doctrines propounded therein". Leibniz's story about the possible worlds is part of his theodicy. God, be it remembered, is omnipotent, omniscient, and completely benevolent. Thus God could have created the world in any way that did not involve a contradiction; Leibniz says he prefers to express this by saying instead that there were infinitely many possible worlds, any one of which God could have created. And for each possible world and each possible individual contained therein (in particular, for the actual world and Adam), God knew before the Creation all that would happen if that world and that individual were brought into existence. Leibniz emphasizes that Adam's complete concept was not changed when he was created, for existence is not an attribute; the concept was (is) the idea in God's mind by reference to which God knew in advance everything that would be true of Adam if he were chosen for existence. That concept, we are told, sufficed to differentiate Adam not only from all other actual individuals, but also from all other possible individuals. Leibniz describes the concept of an individual substance as containing everything that *can* (not just *will*) happen to it (v. DM, section 13).

I do not see how this picture of Creation can be reconciled with the thesis that God had more than one complete individual concept of Adam. It would not be true of any single one of these concepts that, as Leibniz says, God would see in it everything that would happen to Adam if He created him. In my opinion, Leibniz's story postulates, instead an infinite number of complete individual concepts of Adam,

complete individual concepts for an infinite number of "approximations" (cp. the "Sextus-approximations" at *Theodicy*, section 414), one for each.

As concerns superessentialism, it has been pointed out by way of criticism that there are many passages in which Leibniz clearly states that some of an individual's attributes are essential and others are not. But here the word "essential" has a sense quite different from that mentioned above; here, an essential attribute of an individual *X* is an attribute that *X* possesses through all its changes, i.e., throughout its existence—"perpetually", as Leibniz puts it. Thus being human is in this sense an essential attribute of Alexander; being king is not. But the word "essential" is not used that way in recent discussions of essentialism, and when it is said in this context that, according to Leibniz, every attribute of Alexander is essential to him, what is meant is that every attribute of Alexander is such that he could not have existed without it.

Needless to say, Professor Sleight, unlike some authors who have discussed this subject, understands the foregoing distinction perfectly well; but he does think that in the debate with Arnauld Leibniz held a position somewhat less vulnerable than superessentialism, namely "superintrinsicness". This is the doctrine that, for any individual *X*, any possible individual who lacked any attribute of *X* would not be *X*. (v. Grua 327: "you ask why God did not give you more strength than he has; I answer, if he had done that, you would not exist, for he would have produced not you but another creature"). In brief, my problem with this is that, perhaps because of the combination of modality with the subjunctive in the definition of

superintrinsicness, I cannot grasp the intended difference between it and superessentialism.

None of the foregoing must obscure the fact that Professor Sleigh's book is now *the* standard work on a philosophically very important portion of the Leibnizian corpus, a work that will be most useful and stimulating to all future students of Leibniz's metaphysics.

AUTHOR RESPONDS TO REVIEW:
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I appreciate Benson Mates's generous review of my book, and also the editor's willingness to allow me to comment on it. There is one point where Professor Mates attributes to me a view I did not intend to assert, although what I did say is so compressed that even I have had some difficulty divining my intentions. And it may well be that Professor Mates will find the view that I did intend to assert even less satisfactory than the view that he attributes to me, which I did not intend to assert.

Let me begin by saying what I wanted to say on the topic in question: I believe that Leibniz held that for each possible individual substance there is exactly one complete individual concept that is the individual concept of that possible individual substance. That is what I intended to assert on p. 51 (last full paragraph), when I said that Leibniz took the first step toward superessentialism. In fact, putting aside my somewhat quixotic speculations in section 6 of chapter 7 concerning the thesis of radical world-apart (see p. 180), I am inclined to hold that Leibniz held that each possible created individual substance exists in exactly one possible world. On p. 51 I noted that in order to reach superessentialism from these

beginnings a second step is required, i.e., commitment to a specific modal semantics based on this particular structure of possible individuals in possible worlds. Some of David Lewis's work indicates that this particular structure of possible individuals in possible worlds will permit the elaboration of a modal semantics that does not imply superessentialism. On p. 51 I suggested that Leibniz did not take the second step toward superessentialism -- not because I see him as a precursor of David Lewis -- but because I believe that he really had no modal semantics based on possible world theory. His primary characterization of the crucial modal notions in question was of a quite different kind.

Even were I right in all of this it might well be that Leibniz reached superessentialism by some other route. One thesis for which I argued in the book is this: at the time of the correspondence with Arnauld, Leibniz wanted to avoid the commitment to superessentialism. But there is strong textual evidence that he was then committed to the thesis I called superintrinsicness (see sect. 4 of ch. 4). Professor Mates has problems with the alleged distinction between superessentialism and superintrinsicness. So do I. I think the distinction has all sorts of difficulties; I intended to convey some of my concerns in the last paragraph commencing on p. 71. My recommendation there was that we try various readings of the relevant doctrines that Leibniz might have had in mind before we rush to judgment. My claim was that if Leibniz held a fully coherent view on these matters, there must be some interpretation of the relevant notions, plausibly attributable to Leibniz, according to which superessentialism comes out false and superintrinsicness, true. In fact, I doubt that Leibniz's views on these matters are fully coherent, but that is a matter beyond the scope of my book, and surely beyond the scope of this note.