

Leibniz and the Shelf of Essence

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Brandon C. Look
University of Kentucky

1 Skepticism about Actuality

In his essay, “Dispensing with Existence,” D.C. Williams says the following:

There is no more thorough-paced philosopher than Leibniz, and the relations of essence and existence are the very crux of his system; yet he tells us almost nothing about Existence except that it is contingent and a predicate, and he half retracts these. He never intimates, for example, how he can tell that he is a member of the existent world and not a mere possible monad on the shelf of essence. (Williams 1962, pp. 751-52)

Is this a fair charge? Does Leibniz in fact give us no way to make the distinction between our existence in the actual world and our perceptions of a world not actual, when we are merely on the shelf of essence? What could a Leibnizian response to this charge look like? Many of us interested in Leibniz’s philosophy have thought about his views on modality and the extent to which Leibniz adumbrates counterpart-theory. In this paper, I want to look at Williams’s criticism and certain issues related to it, and I want to examine epistemological issues involved in accounts of actuality and modal realism.

As odd as it may seem, skeptical doubt concerning our own actuality can be magnified further. Consider the following argument from David Armstrong’s *A Combinatorial Theory of Possibility*:

- (1) All but one of the infinity of worlds are merely possible (hypothesis)
- (2) This is a world (containing Leibniz, the propounder of the argument, etc.)
Therefore, very probably
- (3) This world is merely possible. (Armstrong 1989, p. 14)

Prima facie, then, it seems much more probable that “our” world is merely possible and not actual, that we, like Leibniz, are merely on the shelf of essence.

Armstrong immediately asserts that this argument is absurd, and, I suspect, that we would all agree. But his subsequent reasoning should also give a Leibnizian pause, for he points out that once (1) is granted we really have no assurance that our world has the privilege of actuality. Of course, Leibniz endorses (1), while rejecting (3). On the other hand, Armstrong argues, if we regard the proposition “this world is actual and not merely possible” as true, then we are justified by *modus tollens* to conclude that (1) is false.¹ And, according to Armstrong, “that seems vastly preferable to accepting (1).” (Armstrong 1989, p. 15) Again, we have a problem for Leibniz’s views.

In order to come to terms with the difficulties involved in this argument, we should consider how Leibniz in fact argues for his position. As we all know, Leibniz assumes that we are indeed members of the actual world and that the other worlds are merely possible relative to it. In other words, a simplified version of Leibniz’s argument could be expressed as follows:

- (4) This world, of which I am a member, is the actual world, created by God.
- (5) But there are (an infinity of) other ways things might have been; that is, there are infinitely many other worlds.
- (6) Therefore, the actual world is one of the infinitely many worlds (or series of things, events, etc.) that God could have chosen to create.

The point here is that Leibniz typically reverses the premises and conclusion of Armstrong’s argument. Whereas Armstrong arrives at the mere possibility of the world in which we live, Leibniz takes the actuality of our world as a premise. But that means we still have the legitimate question for Leibniz: what is it that justifies (4)? Is there anything special about my experience that allows me to assert this with confidence? That is, is there anything in particular that I can experience that will demonstrate with certainty that this world is the actual world? Or is it simply the fact that I can experience anything at all that suffices to guarantee (4)?

One possible line of argument at this point is simply to declare that knowing that we exist in the actual world is akin to knowing a Moorean fact.² Doubt it, and all is lost. And

¹Armstrong’s argument cannot be formally valid; that is, the negation of (3) will not, by *modus tollens*, give us the negation of (1), since our original conclusion was only very probable. (After winning the Lotto, I do not conclude that there must have been only one ticket drawn (mine) and the six corresponding balls in the hopper.) Nevertheless, I believe that Armstrong does effectively suggest that any argument that moves between the actuality of our world and the real existence of an infinity of worlds is more problematic than often thought. My thanks to the referee for raising this issue.

²This is point is also made by Armstrong (1989, p. 15).

given that Leibniz never addressed skepticism of the scale considered by Descartes, this may be a way around the problem. — After all, which skeptical doubt is more pernicious: that I am systematically deceived by an evil genius, or that the world I inhabit and believe to perceive hasn't been made actual by God? I should say the latter, *if it is meaningful at all*, is worse. But perhaps that is exactly the question: what does this say about the meaning of “actuality”?

Finally, it should be noted that implicit in both Williams' critique and Armstrong's tease argument is the idea that it is conceivable for an individual substance in another possible (but non-actual) world to formulate the thought “How wonderful to be actual!” or raise the skeptical doubt “This world I'm in sure looks great, but is it the actual world?” This kind of philosophical problem has notably been called by Robert Merrihew Adams “the problem of actuality.” (Adams 1974, p. 212)

2 Essence and Existence

Before directly confronting the problem of actuality, we should consider the more basic concepts in Leibniz's metaphysics that are at issue: essence and existence. Leibniz, of course, recognizes non-actualized possibles and non-actualized possible worlds. As he argues in his “On Contingency” (1689?),

One must certainly hold that not all possibles attain existence, otherwise one could imagine no novel that did not exist in some place and at some time. Indeed, it does not seem possible for all possible things to exist, since they get in one another's way. There are, in fact, an infinite number of series of possible things. Moreover, one series certainly cannot be contained within another, since each and every one of them is complete. (A VI iv 1651/AG 29)

But what is the character of these non-actualized possibles? I would argue that the most natural assumption is that they are like individual substances as characterized by Leibniz in *Discourse on Metaphysics* §8, that is, as having complete individual concepts. In other words, all individuals (actual or merely possible) have determinate essences. In the case of merely possible individuals, however, their being is contained solely in the divine mind. Consider Leibniz's claim in the *Theodicy* §189: “In the region of the eternal verities are found all the possibles.” (G VI 229/H 246) And, in §44 of the *Monadology*, in the middle of his argument for God's necessary existence, Leibniz says, “if there is reality in essences or possibles, or indeed, in eternal truths, this reality must be grounded in something existent and actual, and consequently, it must be grounded in the existence of the necessary being, in whom essence involves existence, that is, in whom possible being is sufficient for actual being.” (G VI 614/AG 44) In other words, there will be determinate essences of some

substances that are actualized in the world as well as determinate essences of substances that exist solely in the divine mind. Presumably, then, Williams’s “shelf of essence” is simply God’s intellect, which contains ideas of all things that are or could have been.

When we think of Leibniz’s account of the nature of individual substance, however, we not only tend to highlight the complete individual concept theory of the *Discourse on Metaphysics* but also to stress his idea that in simple substances there is nothing but perception and appetite. (G II 270/AG 181) We usually then present Leibniz’s simple substances as beings having a series of perceptions, set in motion by God and in perfect harmony with the perceptions of all other substances. For my purposes now, the origin of the perceptions and their harmony is unimportant; what is important is the idea of a simple substance being constituted by a series of perceptions. For it is this picture that allows us to follow Williams in imagining a non-actualized but possible substance with its series of perceptions, and it is this picture that sets up the skeptical doubt regarding actuality: if non-actualized substances can legitimately be said to experience a merely possible world, then how would their experiences differ from my experience of the actual world?

3 Actuality and Essence

I wish to expand upon Williams’s metaphor of the shelf of essence. On a first pass, let’s say that worlds are music compact discs and that only one can be played. God, full of love of all things beautiful, will pick out the best CD, leaving on his shelf an infinity of other compact discs. Now, on this analogy, I am, or my essence is, simply a byte of information: a finite set of 0’s and 1’s. Now *this* finite essence is replicable in the compact discs sitting on the shelf of essence. And we can even suppose that there are an infinity of compact discs that have this essence at exactly the same place. In fact, there is absolutely nothing about this finite essence that distinguishes it from its twin on another disc; that is, there is nothing about this finite essence that marks it as an actually existing essence, or as a byte on the compact disc that is being played. Of course, the essence of an individual substance is, for Leibniz, much more complex than a string of eight 0’s or 1’s. Not only because each essence, or complete individual concept, will contain everything that is true of the substance, but also because of the mirroring thesis. Nevertheless, there would seem to be nothing special about any particular essence of an actually existing substance in and of itself when compared with the essence of a substance in a merely possible but not actual world.

Perhaps this result should not surprise us. After all, Leibniz typically argues that the *reason* for the existence of the entire series of contingent beings has to be sought in something *outside* the series: that is, in the existence of a necessarily existing being, God. As Leibniz says in the first paragraph of the *On the Ultimate Origination of Things*, “we

cannot find in any of the individual things, or even in the entire collection and series of things, a sufficient reason for why they exist.” (G VII 302/AG 149) If the reason for why this series exists is not to be found within this series, then is the guarantee of this world’s actuality similarly to be found outside this series? That is, if the reason for the existence of this particular world is to be found *outside* of this world, then it would seem that the guarantee that this world is indeed actual must similarly be found outside this world. Leibniz tells us later what this reason is:

[S]ince the ultimate ground must be in something which is of metaphysical necessity, and since the reason for an existing thing must come from something that actually exists, it follows that there must exist some one entity of metaphysical necessity, that is, there must be an entity whose essence is existence, and therefore something must exist which differs from the plurality of things, which differs from the world, which we have granted and shown is not of metaphysical necessity. (G VII 303/AG 150)

Leibniz’s point here is, of course, that there is nothing within the world — that is, within this series of contingent events — that can provide us with a reason why this world exists rather than another. Each contingent thing in the world is the consequence of some other contingent thing, but the entire series is the result of an absolutely necessary being outside the series of events. It seems, though, that this issue can be expressed as a variant of the problem of actuality. For if it is the case that the reason for the existence of this particular series is to be found without this series, then it would seem that one could not, from within the series of contingent events that is our actual world, give a justification for the actual existence of this world. This is another way of suggesting that Williams’s critique is justified and the problem of actuality unavoidable in Leibniz’s system.

In his “Theories of Actuality,” Adams considers a number of possible solutions to the problem of actuality, many of which, he claims, are suggested by things that Leibniz says. (Adams 1974, p. 211) The theory that we most commonly associate with Leibniz is what Adams terms “the divine choice theory of actuality,” which is roughly supported by the argument that I laid out in §1 as a response to Armstrong’s argument: the actual world is the one chosen by God from among the infinite number of possible worlds. Adams cites the following passage from an early meditation on necessity and contingency:

[E]ven if it is certain that what is more perfect will exist, nevertheless the less perfect is still possible. Existence is involved in propositions of fact. But the notion of existence is such that the existent is the kind of state of the universe that pleases God. But it clearly pleases God because it is more perfect. And thus at last a free action is involved. (A VI iv 1449)

Again, we have something like the standard view: there are worlds that vary in degree of perfection, and God actualizes that world that is most pleasing to Him. If we combine this

view with the view expressed in the preceding paragraph, that the reason for the existence of the series of contingent things must be sought outside the series, then we seem to have a nice metaphysical package.

There are two short-comings, however, to this conclusion. First, as Adams himself admits, it does not really answer our problem: “[I]f there is a plurality of possible divine world-choices, the actual world must be distinguished from the other possible worlds as the object of God’s *actual* choice. But if that is what the divine choice theory of actuality says, it does not solve the problem of actuality.” (Adams 1974, p. 213) After all, it might be the case that we are members of a less than optimal world merely on the shelf of essence. *If* we could be assured that we were in fact members of the actual world, then we could be assured of living in the best of all possible worlds (provided we accept Leibniz’s theodicy). But, in the spirit of Armstrong, we could just as well offer the following seemingly absurd argument:

- (7) God makes actual the most perfect possible world.
- (8) This world, the world of which I am a member, is filled with misery and despair and is not the most perfect possible world.
- (9) Therefore, this world is not the actual world; rather I am merely on the shelf of essence.

While this argument does seem absurd, it nevertheless reminds us that the problem of actuality has not been solved.

The second short-coming is that the divine choice theory conflicts with another of Leibniz’s accounts of the origin of the world and by extension with another of Leibniz’s accounts of actuality. I have in mind here Leibniz’s doctrine of striving possibles. This theory can also be found in the *Ultimate Origination of Things*, where Leibniz writes,

[I]n order to explain a bit more distinctly how temporal, contingent, or physical truths arise from eternal, essential or metaphysical truths, we must first acknowledge that since something rather than nothing exists, there is a certain urge for existence or (so to speak) a straining toward existence in possible things or in possibility or essence itself; in a word, essence in and of itself strives for existence. Furthermore, it follows from this that all possibles, that is, everything that expresses essence or possible reality, strive with equal right for existence in proportion to the amount of essence or reality or the degree of perfection they contain, for perfection is nothing but the amount of essence. From this it is obvious that of the infinite combinations of possibilities and possible series, the one that exists is the one through which the most essence or possibility is brought into existence. (G VII 303/AG 150)

The fact that the divine choice theory contradicts the doctrine of striving possibles has been seen as a reason not to take the latter doctrine literally.³ There is much to be said in favor of reading "striving possibles" on a metaphorical level, but we should note the consequences of taking the doctrine of striving possibles as the preferred view. First, we will have to abandon the divine choice theory or the view that the creation of the world follows from the free decree of God, which does seem difficult to do while remaining faithful to so many of Leibniz's pronouncements.⁴ But, second, we may have an answer to the problem of actuality. If we assume that all possible essences are in fact in some kind of competition for existence — that is, to become actual — and if we assume that non-actualized essences did not survive on the field of metaphysical battle, then we have reason to believe that we are among those essences that have survived the fray. Of course, this way of viewing the issue means that there is not really a Williams-like "shelf of essence", but rather a grave-yard of essences, and *we few, we happy few*, shall have no need to doubt that we are members of the actual world.

This possible solution to the problem of actuality might seem promising, but I nonetheless wish to set it aside for the moment and look elsewhere for an answer. And though I like to think of a grave-yard of essences, let us return to Williams's shelf of essence. Upon the shelf of essence are not only essences of possible individuals but also possible worlds, each one of which is constituted by a set of compossibles. As Leibniz tells Bourguet, "the universe is only a certain kind of collection of compossibles; and the actual universe is the collection of all possible existents, that is, of those things that form the richest composite." (G III 573) Now there are genuine difficulties relating to the notion of compossibility that I want to avoid in this paper.⁵ But two points are worth making here. First, a tangential remark: there is usually some confusion with respect to Leibniz's account of plenitude. The Principle of Plenitude is standardly given as "every possibility is realized (at some time)" (Fitting and Mendelsohn 1998, p. 40) In one sense, Leibniz definitely disagrees with this form of the Principle of Plenitude, for, in his view, there are possibles that are never realized — possibles, that is, in other worlds. In another sense, everything that is compossible with this particular actual world is in fact realized at some time. Second, and more relevant to my concerns in this paper, Leibniz here clearly seems to give an indication of another way to approach the problem of actuality: by determining whether this world is the richest composite.

³This is the view in the classic paper on the topic: David Blumenfeld, "Leibniz's Theory of Striving Possibles" in *Studia Leibnitiana* 5(1973): 163-77. Against this view, see the classic response: Christopher Shields, "Leibniz's Doctrine of Striving Possibles" in *Journal of the History of Philosophy* 24(1986): 343-59.

⁴Of course, we could say that God establishes all essences, lets them duke it out with full foreknowledge of the results, and in that sense freely creates the world.

⁵For more on this topic see: Gregory Brown, "Compossibility, Harmony, and Perfection in Leibniz," in *The Philosophical Review* 96(1987): 173-203; and Catherine Wilson, "Plenitude and Compossibility in Leibniz," in *The Leibniz Review* 10(2000): 1-20.

Naturally, it would seem that our finite minds are not in a position to determine an answer to such a question. But must we concede the point so quickly? Leibniz does give some indications that such an approach is not wholly inappropriate. In one of his early pieces, “On Freedom and Possibility” (1680-82?), he writes the following:

And so all truths that concern possibles or essences and the impossibility of a thing or its necessity (that is, the impossibility of its contrary) rest on the principle of contradiction; all truths concerning contingent things or the existences of things, rest on the principle of perfection. Except for the existence of God alone, all existences are contingent. Moreover, the reason [*causa*] why some particular contingent thing exists, rather than others, should not be sought in its definition alone, but in a comparison with other things. For, since there are an infinity of possible things which, nevertheless, do not exist, the reason [*ratio*] why these exist rather than those should not be sought in their definition (for then nonexistence would imply a contradiction, and those others would not be possible, contrary to our hypothesis), but from an extrinsic source, namely, from the fact that the ones that do exist are more perfect than the others. (A VI iv 1445/AG 19, translation altered)

Whereas in the *Ultimate Origination of Things* Leibniz suggests that the reason outside the series is God’s free choice, here he makes a slightly different claim: the reason for the actual existence of a world is *extrinsic* to the world, lying in the fact that the members of this world are more perfect than other non-actualized possibles. It is not a huge step to get back to something like the divine choice theory, for Leibniz need only add that God chooses to create that world that is best. But what I wish to focus on in this passage is Leibniz’s claim that the *causa* for the existence of some particular contingent thing should not be sought in its definition alone — which I will take to mean its essence — but in a comparison with other things. Now, it is clear that the “other things” that Leibniz has in mind are other possible things that do not exist. Later in this same text, it seems that Leibniz is blending elements of what will later be his divine choice theory and his doctrine of striving possibles.

And so we must hold that everything having some degree of perfection is possible and, moreover, that the possible that occurs is the one more perfect than its opposite, and that this happens not because of its nature but because of God’s general resolve to create that which is more perfect. Perfection, or essence, is an urge for existence [*exigentia existentiae*] from which existence indeed follows per se, not necessarily, but from the denial that another thing more perfect prevents it from existing. (A VI iv 1446/AG 20)

As I understand the problem of actuality and Williams’s critique, the issue is how we can *know* that we are members of the actual world. Insofar as Leibniz here brings up the issue

of the comparison of things, it would seem that we have a chance at a solution. For we can go part of the way of ruling out any number of manifestly worse possible worlds. But, of course, we, with our finite minds, are always going to be able to imagine worlds that seem more perfect, more worthy of God's choice, more likely to have won out in the metaphysical battle of striving essences. And so perhaps we must concede the point.

4 Knowledge of Actuality

A well-known critique of physicalism is the so-called knowledge argument.⁶ The point is to show that, even if a person were to know all the physical facts about the world, he or she would still lack knowledge of “what it is like” to be a bat or to see red (if living in a black-and-white cell). The question I wish to raise is whether an analog to this argument can be brought to bear on Leibniz's views of modality.

Again, according to Williams, Leibniz's metaphysics and epistemology provides us with no way to know whether we exist in the actual world or only in a merely possible world. And, though we considered it in some detail in the preceding section, let us return to the question: Is there some fact that an individual knows or can know that would allow it to mark its world as the actual world and distinguish it from the infinity of possible worlds? Is there some fact that an individual could know that would allow him or her to distinguish the actual from the merely possible? From the point of view of God, of course, there is a way to tell the difference. But that's cheating, for God knows which world He chose. Let us consider another case: Suppose some angelic being — call her Mary — can view the possible worlds (or some finite group of them) as well as the actual world. Can Mary tell simply by comparison of the essences of individuals which of the worlds God chose? Are there any features of any essence of any substance that mark it out as a member of the actual world? Not exactly, for it is, as we know, the best complete *series*, the best set of compossibles, that is chosen by God. If we assume that Mary's intellect is finite, then she is merely able to observe some subset of the features of different possible and actual individuals and their relations within some series, and it would seem that she would be unable to mark the actual world from the merely possible worlds. If, on the other hand, Mary were to have an infinite intellect, then she could compare all possible worlds, determine which was the best, and, given that God had to choose the best, know that *that* world was the actual world. In contemporary philosophy of mind, Mary is a scientist who knows all the physical facts relating to light and color but who, having been raised in a black-and-white room and having only seen black-and-white texts and so on, has never experienced color. When she leaves her lab and discovers a red apple, it is argued, she discovers a new kind

⁶See: Thomas Nagel, “What is it like to be a bat?” in *Philosophical Review* 83(1974): 435-50; Frank Jackson, “Epiphenomenal Qualia” in *Philosophical Quarterly* 32(1982): 127-36 and “What Mary Didn't Know” in *Journal of Philosophy* 83(1986): 291-95.

of fact, a non-physical fact. In my example, Mary can leave her actual world and, as an angel, survey other possible worlds. But even if we grant Mary an infinite intellect, I do not think it would be the case that she could be said to discover some new kind of fact. Rather, what she discovers is only a fact of comparative reality or perfection.

Consider another Mary-like case. Imagine a Mary Laplace, who lives within this (actual) world and who knows all qualitative facts about it. Will she be able to say that it is actual? Or does our actual omniscient but world-bound being need to have knowledge of all the other possible worlds to know that this world surpasses them? It seems that, on Leibniz's view, there are two different possible answers. We could say that, since essences strive to exist and the greatest variety with the minimum of laws will be most perfect, Mary will know even from within her world that it has the most reality or perfection possible. On the other hand, we could say, as we did above, that the claim *most reality possible* can only be determined by comparison to other worlds and sets of individuals or essences. It seems to me that we almost always opt for the second option without ever giving the first option much of a thought. But is it so obviously so? After some frustrations and some moderate successes with home improvement, I can imagine a case in which I look at, for example, my freshly-tiled bathroom and say, "It couldn't be better." This judgment would entail some of the following facts: the pattern is most pleasing; there was a minimum of waste; that is, the maximum number of full tiles were used (and the "right" size of tile was picked out as part of the overall beautiful design). If I could know this about the tiling of my bathroom, could not Mary Laplace know this of her world? I think that we ought to admit that Mary Laplace could know that she was actual and not merely on the shelf of essence. In other words, an infinite intellect could mark off the actual world from merely possible worlds, but it can do so only in terms of the degrees of perfection of the sets of compossibles.

But we are like neither our angelic Mary nor Mary Laplace, and the problem of actuality is really a problem for us. So, what have our Mary stories taught us? First, we, with our finite minds, cannot conclude from our knowledge of one piece of the mosaic that the entire artwork is most perfect (or flawed), for we cannot have cognitive access to all possible essences. Second, there is no particular feature *internal* to the actual world that allows a member to *know* that he or she is privileged to actuality. Third, regardless of whether Mary's intellect is finite or infinite and despite her angelic point of view, I would suggest that she cannot read off the property "actually existing" within the essence of an actually existing being because there is no such simple property.

This last point is most important for my purposes because, if I am correct, it undermines Adams's own suggestion of a simple property theory of actuality. According to this theory, "actuality is a simple, unanalyzable property of the actual world, by which it is distinguished from the other possible worlds." (Adams 1974, p. 221) Adams claims that Leibniz suggests this theory when he says, in a piece from 1677, "Existence therefore is a

noncomposite, or unanalyzable [*irresolubilis*] notion.” (A VI iv 25) The simple property theory shows why it is that, according to Adams, we cannot really doubt that we are actual. He says, “it can be maintained that actuality is a simple property which is possessed, not only by the actual world as a whole, but by every thing that exists in the actual world, and that we are as immediately acquainted with our own actuality as we are with our own thoughts, feelings, and sensations.” (Adams 1974, p. 221) But if actuality were a simple property possessed by members of **World** α , presumably there could be a **World** β that was in all respects identical to **World** α , with the sole exception that its members lack the property “actually existing.” This seems absurd, and quite far from Leibniz’s more likely answers to the problem of actuality.

The simple property theory would seem to face additional problems. First, it is at variance with Leibniz’s view that “perfection or degree of essence (through which the greatest number of things are compossible) is the foundation of existence.” (G VII 304/AG 151) If existence were an unanalyzable notion, it would seem odd to be able to deduce the existence or actuality of the world or members of the world from the degree of essence. Second, as Adams himself admits, it is like the divine choice theory in not being able to give us an answer to the question that is driving this particular essay: how can we be certain that this world is the *sole* actual world?⁷ This can be seen perhaps most clearly in the David Lewis’s response. He writes,

I reply that if Adams and I and all the other actual people really have this immediate acquaintance with absolute actuality, wouldn’t my elder sister have had it too, if only I’d had an elder sister? So there she is, unactualized, off in some other world getting fooled by the very same evidence that is supposed to be giving me my knowledge. (Lewis 1986, p. 94)

Lewis is, of course, right in one sense: *if* he had had an elder sister, she would have had immediate acquaintance with absolute actuality. But it need not follow (for a Leibnizian, at least) that “she *is*, unactualized, *off* in some other world getting fooled by the very same evidence.” There may indeed be worlds, considered as complex sets of compossible ideas (some of which include an essence for the elder sister of David Lewis), in the infinite intellect of God, but not even Leibniz would say that Lewis’s sister was off in another world

⁷Adams phrases the question somewhat differently; he asks, “How, then, does the actual world differ from the other possible worlds in relation to the primitive property of actuality?” He concludes his discussion thus: “The problem could be solved by a simple property theory only if we were prepared to deny that the nonactual possible worlds were possibly actual. But that denial entails that there is no such thing as contingent actuality. We would have to conclude that the actual world, in all its infinite detail, is the only possible world that could have been actual. And we would be left to wonder in what sense the other possible worlds are possible, since they could not have been actual.” (Adams 1974, p. 222) One solution to this problem might simply be to say that a world is possible simply if it represents some compossible state of affairs but that such a world is not possibly actual given the Leibniz’s principle of the best. This would seem to fit in well with Leibniz’s claim that possibility is simply absence of contradiction.

getting fooled by her experiences, anymore than that Leibniz's wife was off in another world softly kissing his balding head.⁸

The knowledge argument is thought to deal a blow to physicalism because it points out a kind of experience that is not captured by physicalistic facts. I would like to submit that a Leibnizian answer to the problem of actuality can likewise be found by examining more carefully the nature of experience itself. Although he is not addressing the problem of actuality, Leibniz does suggest that *experience* shows us what is actual. In his discussion of real and nominal essence in the *Nouveaux Essais*, he writes the following:

Essence is fundamentally nothing but the possibility of the thing under consideration. Something which is thought possible is expressed by a definition; but if this definition does not at the same time express this possibility then it is merely nominal, since in this case we can wonder whether the definition expresses anything real — that is, possible — until experience comes to our aid by acquainting us *a posteriori* with the reality (when the thing actually occurs in the world). This will do, when reason cannot acquaint us *a priori* with the reality of the thing defined by exhibiting its cause or the possibility of its being generated. So it is not within our discretion to put our ideas together as we see fit, unless the combination is justified either by reason, showing its possibility, or by experience, showing its actuality and hence its possibility. (A VI vi 293-94/RB 293-94)

If experience shows us *what* is actual as opposed to merely possible, then it is probably fair to conclude that, on Leibniz's view, experience shows us *that* we are in the actual world. But *prima facie* this seems to be either a trivial or a bizarre statement. *If* we assume that substances in other possible worlds will have something like perceptual contents as part of their essences, then they, too, experience a world — unfortunately for them, it is not the actual world that they experience. But it might seem that Leibniz is in fact giving something like a knowledge argument in favor of the actuality of this world: *I* know by my experience that I am a member of the actual world, and that even if an individual in another possible world had experience of his or her world, it could not be like my experience of this actual world.

I discussed Leibniz's views concerning the nature or essence of simple substance in §2, highlighting the standard account from the *Discourse on Metaphysics* and suggesting that we often consider simple substances as being constituted by a series of perceptions. But Leibniz's mature metaphysical view is richer and appeals also to the forces inherent in simple substances. As he puts it in the correspondence with De Volder,

⁸The point here is that Lewis's way of speaking is fine for the modal realist but misleading when we are dealing with Leibniz's views on modality. I shall have more to say about this below.

[I]t is obvious that primitive forces can be nothing but the internal strivings [*tendentia*] of simple substances, strivings by means of which they pass from perception to perception in accordance with a certain law of their nature, and at the same time harmonize with one another, representing the same phenomena of the universe in different ways, something that must necessarily arise from a common cause. (G II 275/AG 181)

This view is expressed in the *Theodicy* thus:

[B]y nature every simple substance has perception, and its individuality consists in the perpetual law which brings about the sequence of perceptions that are assigned to it, springing naturally from one another, to represent the body that is allotted to it, and through its instrumentality the entire universe, in accordance with the point of view proper to this simple substance and without its needing to receive any physical influence from the body. (G VI 289-90/H 304)

We can presume, I think, that there are infinitely many substances in other possible worlds that have complete individual concepts or that have laws of unfolding. In other words, the essences or possibles that reside in the realm of the divine intellect ought to be considered nothing other than complete individual concepts of substances, each of which has its own sequence of perceptions assigned to it.

But, one wonders, *if* a possible world has not been actualized, can one really speak of the *passing* of perception to perception? If the possibles really exist only in the mind of God, then, while they may be said to have complete individual concepts with something like time-indexed properties or predicates, the non-actualized substances cannot really be said to experience a flow of perceptions in the way that we do. While the laws of unfolding are present in the divine mind for all substances, only some set of substances (those constituting the actual world) has been created, that is, only some set has had its laws activated. In other words, only actual substances possess the primitive forces that drive it from perception to perception. And, insofar as I am conscious of a flow of perceptions, I can be certain that I am in the actual world and not merely on the shelf of essence. On this view, possible worlds could be seen to be like serial patterns of dominoes, and each domino (substance) in every one of the possible patterns (worlds) has a unique design (essence). Nevertheless, only one of the patterns will be selected for toppling. Inspection of an individual domino will not determine whether or not that domino is part of the selected series, but its motion or falling will indicate that it is actually in the selected world.

Therefore, Leibniz may be right when he says that experience teaches us what is actual and what merely possible. But my solution draws attention to the fact that we often are careless when we appeal to experience as the guarantor of our actuality. Indeed, it is

important to realize that the view that I am offering differs slightly from the view that Adams puts forward: that we are simply aware of, that is, experience, our own actuality. And it likewise differs from the view suggested by Armstrong: that we simply take our actuality as a Moorean fact. Put simply, there is no single content of experience that will determine for us whether our world is actual or not; there is no particular perception (nor any particular property) within a substance that can serve to mark off one world as actual; rather, it is the flow of experience that in fact accomplishes this task. And, more important, we now have a Leibnizian justification of our own actuality: only actual substances have primitive forces; only actual substances possess a true spontaneity, by which they move from perception to perception.

If this is the case, then we might be justified in extending this point in the following way: *consciousness itself* only truly exists in the actual world. The point here is that conscious reflection on the succession of one's perceptual states will be much like awareness of the motion of a body. Recall Zeno's arrow paradox. Motion is supposed to be impossible because, at each 'now', an arrow occupies its own place — that is, at each moment, an arrow is at rest — and time is merely a set of 'nows'; therefore, the arrow is at every moment at rest. Aristotle, of course, refutes this argument by showing that motion at a 'now' is meaningless.⁹ In the same way, perhaps, consciousness, or experience, at a moment, that is, reflection on a particular perceptual state, is meaningless, for we can only reflect on the flowing of these states. And it is this flow that guarantees that we are, in fact, members of the actual world.¹⁰

This reflects a curious parallel to Descartes' proposed solution to the dreaming hypothesis. Just as Descartes concludes that we can be certain that our waking experiences are real because they exhibit a strong degree of continuity that is lacking in dreaming experience, so Leibniz has the resources to say that, the fact that we experience anything in a continual flow of perceptions, proves that our possible world has been actualized. This parallel to Descartes' response to skepticism is explicitly brought out in an early letter to Foucher, written in 1675:

But even though the existence of necessities is the first of all truths in and of itself and in the order of nature, I agree that it is not first in the order of our knowledge. For you see, in order to prove their existence I took it for granted that we think and that we have sensations. Thus there are two absolute general truths, that is, two absolute general truths which speak of the actual existence of things: the first, that we think, and the second, that there is a great

⁹Aristotle, *Physics*, 239b5ff.

¹⁰It is not the case, however, that the essences of non-actual possibles have no relation to time. As Leibniz says to De Volder, "*time* is the order of existing for possibles that exist successively." (G II 269/AG 179) Nevertheless, the experiential fact of the unfolding of perceptions is *not*, presumably, something that the non-actual possibles possess.

variety in our thoughts. From the former it follows that we exist, and from the latter it follows that there is something else besides us, that is, something else besides that which thinks, something which is the cause of the variety of our appearances. Now one of these two truths is just as incontestable and as independent as the other; and Descartes, having accepted only the former, failed to arrive at the perfection to which he had aspired in the course of his meditations. (A II i 246/AG 2)

It should be clear that Leibniz is not addressing directly the question of the actual existence of this world versus the merely possible (but not actual) existence of this world, but rather the standard skeptical problem of whether the world is actually as it appears to be. Nevertheless, a solution to Williams's critique in the form offered above is clearly there. Note, too, that another way to ask Williams's question is whether, in any (non-actual) possible world, an individual can express in time and as a result of a period of reflection the *cogito*. I believe that, for Leibniz, the answer is no.

We should also recognize that the knowledge argument has the following implication for modality: "Knowing what it's like to" is knowledge that, in the end, can only be gained in the actual world. There is no qualitative knowledge of this sort in non-actualized possible worlds, for there are no non-actualized possible worlds that are running their own courses somewhere (even if in the mind of God). That is, within a Leibnizian metaphysics, there can be no individuals sitting on the shelf of essence, who are in the process of wondering whether they occupy a place in the actual world. Now, one could respond to this view by asserting that there may very well be possible worlds that include individuals whose essences include the perceptions or thoughts or propositions, "I wonder if Williams* is right about Leibniz*" ¹¹ But on the view that I am suggesting on Leibniz's behalf, perceptions are not coarsely-grained enough to allow this; even the doubt "I wonder if Williams* is right about Leibniz*" takes place over time and can only arise from the unfolding of perceptions within an actual substance.

Given the solution offered above — that it is our flow of experience that guarantees that we are in fact actual — I would like to look again at one of the metaphors I appealed to earlier. I said that this world could be likened to one music compact disc that God has chosen to play. My "essence," or individual concept, may simply be "10010111," and it or some counterpart could be in other compact discs on the shelf of God's music collection. ¹² But the important point is that it is our consciousness of the flow of experience that guarantees our actuality; and it is my experience of, as it were, saying, "I perceive a 1 now,

¹¹The "*" is to show that these are counterparts to Williams and Leibniz in other possible worlds.

¹²Strictly speaking, the individual concept cannot be said to be complete because it is not such that everything past and future is deducible from it. Also, on the interpretation of Leibniz that I favor, one cannot say that the *same* essence could be on compact discs on God's music shelf. The essence is CD-bound. But I need not argue for this position here.

a 0 now, a 0 now, a 1 now” and so on that can keep me from the fear that I am merely on the shelf of essence. For, in the end, it is the internal tendency of my mind to go from perception to perception that distinguishes actuality from mere possibility.

5 Conclusion

At a couple points in this paper, I tried to hint at the fact that I think the problem of actuality is oddly formed and Williams’s criticism of Leibniz misleading. Now I wish to be more explicit. Williams’s criticism draws its power by suggesting that it makes sense for a non-actual individual to raise the doubt, “Am I actual or merely on the shelf of essence?” And David Lewis plays on an unanalyzed notion of experience when he asks us about his non-existent sister who is off in another world and constantly deceived by the evidence of her senses, which suggest to her that her world does in fact exist. Readers of Leibniz then, who consider individual substances as being constituted by a series of perceptions and all possible essences as being in the divine intellect, could likewise imagine non-actualized individual substances running their programs even though they have not been blessed with actuality. But, as I hope to have shown, experience teaches us that we are actual: not just a particular perception of a particular feature of the world, and not just a simple awareness of a simple property within ourselves; but the form of experience itself, as a continuous unfolding of perceptions, shows us that we are actual. This solution to the problem of actuality follows from Leibniz’s metaphysics of substance, according to which each actual substance has a primitive force causing it to go from perception to perception. And, therefore, since we are conscious of the flow of perceptions within us, we are justified in believing that our world is the actual world.

Are we not to say that other possible worlds are experienced by their denizens? What is the nature, then, of the other possible worlds? Catherine Wilson suggests quite rightly that a Leibnizian world is just like what we see before us. She continues, “To say that there are ‘other worlds’ is to say that there is or could be something like this that I could never experience, act in, or come to know.” (Wilson 2000, p. 10) I should like to put the issue in the following way: a possible world is a completely determinate set of compossible essences which, *if actualized, would be experienced* by the members of the world according to their own laws of unfolding and in conformity with the unfolding of perceptions of the other members of the world. In other words, if a possible world is not actual, then its members, although they have complete individual concepts that include series of perceptions, do not experience the world as we do — as a flowing series of perceptions.

According to Adams, there are both actualist and possibilist strands in Leibniz’s thought. (Adams 1974, p. 228) While I think this is correct, what I am trying to do here is push for a stronger actualist reading of Leibniz. For the sense in which Leibniz

would really allow for the existence of possible worlds is shaky at best, and it is the actualist account, along with recognition of the special character of experience, that avoids Williams's charge. If one agrees with Lewis's way of speaking, according to which there are other possible worlds off there, in which individuals are busy experiencing their worlds, then there is no good solution to Williams's challenge, and one should really adopt Lewis's indexical theory of actuality.¹³ A Leibnizian, of course, cannot make this move. For, as soon as one says that actual is an indexical, used meaningfully by denizens of other possible worlds, one has left in shambles Leibniz's principal thesis: that *this world* is the *best* of all possible worlds. Williams' critique has now been shown to be less serious than one might have originally supposed. Similarly, it has been shown that one is led down the wrong path when one imagines that Leibniz's metaphysics and epistemology allow for Lewisian possible worlds. It is simply not the case that there *are* other individuals living out their lives in other possible worlds, who may think that they are actual but are deceived. Nevertheless, there *are* other individual essences existing in the divine intellect, and, in that sense alone, they are possible beings that together can constitute other possible worlds.

I suggested earlier that the form of doubt that Williams raises could be seen as even more troubling than Cartesian doubt. But now we can see that perhaps this form of doubt is only legitimate when one believes that the individuals in the other possible worlds experience things as we do. If, however, one recognizes that these individuals can have complete individual concepts or laws of unfolding without having the experience of moving from perception to perception as we in the actual world do, then this form of skepticism disappears. Therefore, just as no Cartesian or post-Cartesian philosopher will attach significance to the utterance "I do not exist," let no Leibnizian be troubled by the thought "Maybe I'm just on the shelf of essence."

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¹³I could put my point thus: any being that can reflect on its own "modal status" can know with certainty that it is actual. For Lewis, since there are beings off in any number of worlds capable of such reflection, their assertions "I am a member of the actual world" are all equally true. That is, *actual* is an indexical property. For Leibniz, I claim, only members of our actual world can be conscious of their modal status; only they can experience a flow of perceptions (and doubts) as such. Thus, *actuality* is a property only of our world.

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