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“Leibniz and the Ground of Possibility”

Leibniz’s metaphysics of modality has become well-trod interpretive ground. Previous discussions have focused mostly on Leibniz’s *analyses* of modality (per se possibility, infinite analysis) and closely associated metaphysical topics (e.g., necessitarianism, superessentialism, counterpart theory). This paper focuses on a different aspect of Leibniz’s modal metaphysics: the *grounding* of modality. In the first half of the paper, I explore Leibniz’s oft-repeated claim that possibilities and possible worlds are grounded in the Divine intellect. In the second half, I respond to internal and external objections to his grounding thesis.

That possibilities are grounded in God’s intellect is one of Leibniz’s most stable modal views. He often distinguishes it from Descartes’ alternative, though it is also importantly distinct from Spinoza’s view that possibilities are grounded in the most fundamental Divine properties (the “attributes”). In the first section of the paper, I discuss the details of Leibniz’s theistic grounding claims and their motivations. I also distinguish his grounding relation from other forms of dependence and emphasize its explanatory role. I also stress the easily missed distinction between Leibniz’s concept combinatorialism (combinatorialism about basic Divine concepts and their relation to simple, purely positive Divine attributes) and his modal combinatorialism (combinatorialism about possibilities and their grounding in basic Divine ideas), a distinction that will be important for handling later objections.

In the second section, I consider and respond briefly to several internal concerns facing Leibniz’s grounding thesis. Can Divine ideas provide Leibniz with suitable grounds for the *de re* modal ascriptions his essentialism demands? When applied to modal truths about God’s own nature, must Leibniz separate grounding from truth-making to avoid circularity worries (as Russell and Adams have suggested)? What principles configure the space of Divine ideas and how are impossibilities among ideas of possible substances generated?

In the third and final section, I consider a pair of recent, external objections to Leibniz’s grounding claims. The early, pre-critical Kant proposed a broader theistic ground for creaturely possibilities: exemplified, non-representational Divine properties, rather than Leibniz’s Divine ideas. Robert Adams and Andrew Chignell have recently

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argued (for different reasons) that Leibniz's version is inadequate and that Kant's alternative is preferable. Using the framework developed in section 1, I show how Leibniz can plausibly defend against their objections. I also argue that Leibniz's account avoids certain unorthodox conclusions in ways that the Kantian alternative cannot. Though unintended, the principles behind Adams' and Chignell's respective objections actually lead to Spinoza's bloated God, one whose nature instantiates every possible creaturely property to every possible degree (Ip16).