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NECESSITY AND CONTINGENCY IN LEIBNIZ

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I

A recurrent theme in the work of Leibniz is his attempt to reconcile his view that all truths are analytic with his view that propositions about substances (individuals) are contingent. It has been suggested, by Mates and Mondadori, among others, that Leibniz had available to him a clear-cut way to effect this reconciliation, by relying both on his (purported) view that all propositions with a nonexemplified subject term (concept) are false, and on the contingent existence of all created substances. Thus, on this suggestion, though the proposition expressed by "Gerald Ford is a Republican" is analytically true, it is not a necessary truth: there are possible worlds in which Ford does not exist, and the proposition expressed by "Gerald Ford is a Republican" is false of these worlds (having there a nonexemplified subject term). However, Leibniz does not take this line in his account of contingent propositions; rather, he resorts to an extremely difficult and unsatisfactory account based on the analysis of terms, and the reduction of truths to identities. Why Leibniz foregoes the simpler solution in favor of the more obscure has been called by Mates "perhaps the most puzzling of all the problems here."

In what follows I will argue that the proposal of Mates and Mondadori fails to account for the contingency of several common classes of propositions about individual substances, and that, moreover, the proposal itself is based on a serious misinterpretation of the Leibnizian semantics. By showing the inadequacy of the proposed solution to Leibniz's difficulties with contingency, I hope to remove some of the puzzlement regarding Leibniz's failure to adopt it. In so doing, I believe, it will become clear why there can be no coherent account of contingency that is consistent both with Leibniz's semantics and with his complete concept theory of individuals.

II

The basic building block in Leibniz's logic of propositions is the term: "by 'term' I understand, not a name, but a concept, i.e., that which is

3 Mates, p. 98.
signified by a name; you could also call it a notion, an idea" (P, p. 39). A primitive term for Leibniz is one which is “unanalyzable or assumed to be unanalyzable.” A composite term is one which can be analyzed into two or more terms. The concept of A (that is, the term expressed by “A”) is said to “contain” the concept of B if and only if every component of the latter is a component term of the former (Leibniz envisions complex terms to be built up by conjunctions of simpler terms, which will be the components).

For Leibniz, a categorical proposition, to which Leibniz believes all other propositional forms can be reduced, expressed by “A is B” asserts that the concept of A contains the concept of B. This view of the structure of categorical propositions leads directly to what has become known as Leibniz’s “containment conception” of truth: a true proposition is one in which the predicate concept is contained in the subject concept—in modern terms, every true proposition is analytic:

Always in every affirmative proposition whether veritable, necessary or contingent, universal or singular, the concept of the predicate is comprised in some sort in that of the subject. Either the predicate is in the subject or else I do not know what truth is. [Corr., July 14, 1686]

Every truth has its proof a priori, drawn from the meaning of the terms. [Corr. July 14, 1686]

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5 Leibniz’s characterization of a categorical proposition as one which asserts that the predicate concept is contained in the subject concept is strictly applicable only to universal propositions (which Leibniz takes to include singular propositions), and must be qualified for particular ones. The universal proposition that all gold is metal would be symbolized by Leibniz as “G is (contains) M”; that is, the concept of gold “simply and in itself” contains the concept of metal. However, the concept of metal does not in itself contain the concept of gold, and so the particular proposition that some metal is gold cannot be symbolized as “M is (contains) G.” Leibniz’s solution is to interpret the particular proposition that some metal is gold as asserting that the concept of metal “with some addition or specification (e.g. ‘that which makes up the greater part of a Hungarian ducat’)” does contain the concept of gold. The result of such addition or further specification to a subject concept is what Leibniz calls a “species” of the subject. The proposition that some metal is gold is, for Leibniz, the proposition that some species of metal is gold, where “it is not stated expressly just what the species is.” This would be symbolized as “MX is G,” where “X” now represents the unspecified concept which, when added to the concept of metal, forms a subject term which does contain the concept of gold (P, pp. 18-24).
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Since, for Leibniz, all true propositions are analytic, this seems to leave him no choice but to allow that all truths are necessary, including those about created beings (individual substances). But such a result is unacceptable to Leibniz, as it is in direct conflict with his theological views. If all truths were necessary, then God could not have made the world differently than he did; and if it were impossible that the world be otherwise than it is, it would be nonsensical to praise God for creating this one (which, according to Leibniz, is the best of the infinity of possible worlds). Moreover, if all human actions were necessary, this would be incompatible with the status of men as moral agents, deserving of divine punishment or reward. Thus, it is crucial for Leibniz to be able to provide for the contingency of propositions concerning created substances; the effort to accomplish this is at the heart of a great deal of Leibniz’s philosophy and logic.

We come now to the suggestion of Mates and Mondadori as to how Leibniz could have consistently accounted for the contingency of propositions concerning individual substances. Their suggestion rests on an interpretation of a crucial passage in Leibniz’s *General Investigations* (C, p. 393; G.I., p. 71; P, p. 82). Mates translates this passage as follows:

This however presupposes denying every proposition in which there is a term that does not exist. In order, namely, to keep [the principle] that every proposition is true or false, [I consider] as false every proposition that lacks an existent subject or real term. In the case of existential propositions this is somewhat remote from the ordinary way of talking. But there is no reason why I should care about that, since I am looking for a suitable notation [proprza signal, not purporting to apply existing terminology [recepta nomzna] correctly.

Mates interprets this as “Leibniz’s decision to regard as false every atomic sentence containing a singular name N that is non-denoting,” as “the proposal to regard ‘A is B’ as false if A does not denote anything,” and as stating that “if A does not denote, every sentence of the form ‘A is B’ is false, no matter what the predicate B may be.”6 Moreover, Mates believes that this semantics applies, not only to the actual world, but to possible worlds as well, so that “‘A is B’ is true of a possible world W just in case the concept expressed by B is contained in the concept expressed by A and the latter concept belongs to W” (I take it here that by “belonging to W” Mates means “exemplified in W”). Similarly, Mondadori interprets the passage as “Leibniz’s view that a sentence of the form ‘a is P’ is true of a given world w just in case the complete concept exemplified

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6 Mates, p. 93.
by a is a member of w and ‘contains’ the property expressed by P.”7 I will later call into question the validity of this interpretation of Mates and Mondadori. But first I will give them their interpretation in order to see if it is as helpful as they believe.

Consider, then, the proposition expressed by the sentence “Ford is a Republican”—how do Mates and Mondadori account for its contingency? The proposition is true of the actual world. However, Ford, like all created substances, is not a necessary being—there are possible worlds in which he does not exist. In these worlds the name “Ford” fails to denote, and the complete concept of Ford is not exemplified. Thus, on the Mates-Mondadori interpretation of Leibniz’s semantics, in these worlds the proposition expressed by “Ford is a Republican” is false. So the proposition, being true of some worlds and false of others, is a contingent truth rather than a necessary one, which is the result desired by Leibniz. This same move, it appears, could be used to account for the contingent truth of all (true) propositions expressed by sentences of the form “A is B,” where “A” denotes an individual substance.

IV

Why hasn’t Leibniz adopted this account of contingency? One way to answer this question would be to find some inadequacy in the Mates-Mondadori line (other than their interpretation of the semantics), one which might explain why Leibniz avoids it. Initially, there appears to be a way to do this. The first step is to point out that Leibniz wants all propositions about created substances to be contingent (other than those which express identities), the true as well as the false. Whatever explanation, then, that Leibniz offers for the distinction between necessary and contingent propositions, it must account for, not only the contingency of truths concerning individuals, but also the contingency of falsehoods concerning individuals.

Consider now the false proposition expressed by “Ford is a non-Republican”—can the Mates-Mondadori line account for its contingency? At first sight, the answer seems to be negative. In all possible worlds in which Ford exists (including the actual world—in truth, Leibniz holds that an individual can exist in only one possible world8),

7 Mondadori, p. 24.
8 Leibniz’s claim that an individual can exist in only one possible world is a direct consequence of his complete concept theory of individuals. A complete concept completely determines an individual; such a concept specifies the individual’s relations, for all time, to every other entity in the universe. Such a concept thus completely specifies that universe or, in Leibniz’s words, “involves the whole sequence of the universe.” So an individual cannot exist
the proposition is false because the complete concept of Ford includes the concept of being a Republican, and thus if Ford exists he will be a Republican. In all possible worlds in which Ford does not exist, "Ford" is nondenoting, and thus, on the present interpretation of Leibniz's semantics, the proposition expressed by "Ford is a non-Republican" would again be false. Hence, the proposition, being false in all possible worlds, would apparently have to be regarded as necessarily false by Mates and Mondadori. But Leibniz wants such a proposition to be contingently false. Thus, it seems to be a serious defect in the Mates-Mondadori line that false propositions expressed by sentences of the form "A is non-B," where "A" denotes an individual substance, come out as necessarily false.

Mates and Mondadori might make the following reply to this objection. They might claim that, for Leibniz, although propositions expressed by sentences of the form "A is B" are false of worlds in which "A" fails to denote, this is not the case for propositions expressed by sentences of the form "A is non-B." In fact, they might argue, the propositions expressed by "A is B" and "A is non-B" are contradictionary for Leibniz, or what he calls "opposites." This might be argued as follows. For Leibniz, to say that A is B is to say that A contains B, and to say that A is not B is to say that A does not contain B (G.I., p. 38). Furthermore, "A is not B" is the same as 'A is non-B" (G.I., p. 53). Finally, there is this quotation from Leibniz:

> Of these propositions: "A contains B [A is B] and "A does not contain B [A is non-B], one is true, the other false; or they are opposites . . . provided the terms are possible. Therefore, they are not true or false at the same time [G.I., p. 43; brackets mine.].

Thus, the reply would continue, if the proposition expressed by "A is B" is false, as will be the case for a world in which "A" fails to denote, the proposition expressed by "A is non-B" is true. Moreover, this seems to be quite in keeping with Leibniz's adherence to the Scholastic principle that "What does not exist has no properties."

Suppose that N is not A, N is not B, N is not C, and so on. Then we can say that N is nothing. This is what the common saying, that what does not exist has no attributes, refers to 'S, p. 472'.

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Proof: On Leibniz's complete concept theory, the complete concept of Ford contains the concepts of all the properties Ford would have were he to exist. Ford exists, and has the property of being a Republican; thus, the complete concept of Ford contains the concept of being a Republican.
“Non-being” is what is purely privative, or privative of all things, or non-Y; i.e., non-A, non-B, non-C, etc.; and this is what is popularly stated as: there are no properties of nothing [G.I., p. 23].

At a world in which individual A fails to exist, it is false that A is B and true that A is non-B, false that A is C and true that A is non-C, etc.

Consider again the false proposition expressed by “Ford is a non-Republican.” Mates and Mondadori might now claim that this proposition will be true of the worlds in which Ford does not exist, because its “opposite,” the proposition expressed by “Ford is a Republican,” is false of these worlds. Because Ford is not a necessary being, there will be possible worlds in which he does not exist, and so, according to this reply, there are possible worlds for which the proposition expressed by “Ford is a non-Republican” is true—the proposition is now contingently false rather than necessarily false. So it might seem that the Mates-Mondadori account can explain the contingency of false propositions expressed by sentences of the form “A is non-B.”

However, this reply is unsatisfactory on several counts. On the one hand, it is self-defeating: such a defense of the Mates-Mondadori line against the initial objection leaves it vulnerable to another—it cannot now account for the contingency of truths expressed by sentences of the form “A is non-B.” For example, consider the true proposition expressed by “Ford is a non-Democrat.” This proposition will be true of all worlds in which Ford exists, due to the complete concept theory. But it will also be true in all worlds in which Ford does not exist, for (supposedly) its “opposite,” the proposition expressed by “Ford is a Democrat,” is false at these worlds, being expressed by a sentence of the form “A is B” and having a nonexemplified subject term. So the proposition expressed by “Ford is a non-Democrat” would now come out as a necessary truth on the Mates-Mondadori account.

In addition, the reply is not effective against the objection that the Mates-Mondadori line cannot account for the contingency of false propositions expressed by sentences of the simple form “A is B.” For instance, the proposition expressed by “Ford is a Democrat” is false of the actual world, and is false of all possible worlds in which Ford exists, as is guaranteed by the complete concept theory. According to the Mates-Mondadori interpretation of the Leibnizian semantics, the proposition will also be false of all worlds in which Ford does not exist. Thus, this proposition is false of all possible worlds, and hence is necessarily false.

These inadequacies alone constitute ample reason for Leibniz to avoid the Mates-Mondadori account of contingency. To recapitulate, what has been shown is that, even allowing them their interpretation of Leibniz’s semantics (in particular, that found in C, p. 393), Mates and
Mondadori cannot give a satisfactory account of the contingency of propositions concerning individual substances. There is also very good reason to believe that this interpretation itself is incorrect.

V

Leibniz's "containment conception" of truth is a cornerstone of his philosophy (for example, "either the predicate is in the subject or else I do not know what truth is"). Any interpretation of the Leibnizian semantics which is inconsistent with this conception must be suspect. On the Mates-Mondadori interpretation, propositions expressed by sentences of the form "A is B" are false of worlds in which "A" fails to denote; at such worlds, in accordance with Leibniz's statement about "opposites," propositions expressed by sentences of the form "A is non-B" will be true. This gives results which are at odds with the containment conception of truth. Consider the true proposition expressed by "Ford is a Republican." For Leibniz, the proposition is true just because the complete concept of Ford includes, or contains, the concept of being a Republican—but this remains the case in every world, whether Ford the individual exists there or not. So, on the containment conception of truth, the proposition expressed by "Ford is a Republican" will be true at all worlds, not just at those in which Ford the individual exists; this is actually the root of Leibniz's problem with contingency. Similarly, the complete concept of Ford does not contain the concept of being non-Republican; consequently the proposition expressed by "Ford is a non-Republican" can be true at no worlds, contrary to the result of the Mates-Mondadori interpretation of the semantics.

What has happened is this. Mates and Mondadori have given us an extensional interpretation of the passage at C 393: they are concerned with the denotation of names and the exemplification of concepts. But Leibniz makes it quite clear that he prefers an intensional treatment of propositions and their logic (though he also maintains that an extensional logic would have the same set of theorems):

The Scholastics speak differently; for they consider, not concepts, but instances which are brought under universal concepts. . . . However, I have preferred to consider universal concepts, i.e. ideas, and their combinations, as they do not depend on the existence of individuals [P, p. 20].

But why would Leibniz want to deny existential import to universal propositions, and thus to singular ones? The answer can be found in a letter to Arnauld:

All that is actual can be conceived as possible and if the actual Adam will have in time a certain posterity we cannot deny this same predicate to this Adam conceived as
possible, inasmuch as you grant that God sees in him all these predicates when he determines to create him. They therefore pertain to him. And I do not see how what you say regarding the reality of possibles could be contrary to it. In order to call anything possible, it is enough that we are able to form a notion of it when it is only in the divine understanding, which is, so to speak, the region of possible realities. Thus, in speaking of possibles, I am satisfied if veritable propositions can be formed concerning them. Just as we might judge, for example, that a perfect square does not imply contradiction, although there has never been a perfect square in the world, and if one tried to reject absolutely these pure possibles he would destroy contingency and liberty. For if there was nothing possible except what God has actually created, whatever God created would be necessary and God, desiring to create anything would be able to create that alone without having any freedom of choice [Corr., July 14, 1686; italics mine].

So, for instance, we might judge that the complete concept of Superman (if we could know this concept) “does not imply contradiction”; God could have created Superman if he had wished. Yet, even though Superman does not exist, we cannot deny the predicates of being caped, being the strongest man in the world, etc., to this individual conceived as possible. And, in speaking of possibles, Leibniz is satisfied if true propositions can be formed concerning them. Leibniz wants to be able to form true propositions about beings, and worlds, that God could have created. So, Leibniz wants the propositions expressed by “Superman is caped,” “Superman is the strongest man in the world,” etc., to be true. The containment conception of truth, which is intensional rather than extensional, allows Leibniz this result.

What then is the proper interpretation of the passage at C 393? The key sentence there is “I consider as false every proposition that lacks an existent subject or real term.” What Mates and Mondadori seem to have overlooked is that, for Leibniz, terms are concepts and that subjects and predicates are terms—and “real term,” “true term,” “possible term,” and “existent term” are all synonymous:

A-non-A is a contradiction [G.I., p. 37].

Possible is what does not contain a contradiction or “A-non-A” [G.I., p. 37].

False in general I define as what is not true (or what contains terms in which B and non-B occur) [G.I., p. 45]

A false or non-true term is one which contains “A-non-A” [G.I., p. 76].

If I say “AB is not” [translated as “AB does not exist” by Parkinson, p. 87], it is the same as if I say “A contains non-B” or “B contains non-A” or “A and B are inconsistent” [G.I., p. 77].

Thus, the proper interpretation of C 393 is that all propositions which have as subject a term which contains a contradiction are to be regarded
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as false. This sense of the passage is brought out most clearly in Parkinson's translation, which reads, in part, "So it remains that every proposition is either true or false, but that every proposition which lacks a consistent subject, i.e., a real term, is false" [P, p. 82].

As an example, let term C be coincident with term A-non-B, or C = A-non-B. The term CB will be the term A-non-B-B; therefore, CB will be a contradictory term. All propositions that have CB as subject will be false, as they lack a consistent subject. So the proposition which asserts that CB contains B will be false, as will the proposition that CB contains non-B. This in no way contradicts what Leibniz has said about propositions which are "opposites" (G.I., p. 43), for he says that this applies only to propositions whose terms are possible. Leibniz does point out (C, 393) that this convention does not conform to ordinary usage. That is, Leibniz implies that we ordinarily would say that A-non-B-B contains B and also that A-non-B-B contains non-B. But he dismisses this variance as "not a matter which concerns me, because I am seeking fitting signs, and I do not plan to apply traditional terms to these propositions."

This also gives us a new way to interpret Leibniz's dictum that "what does not exist has no attributes." When applied to terms, "existence" is, for Leibniz, synonymous with "possible" or "consistent." We have just seen that if A is a contradictory concept, there can be no true propositions which assert that A contains C, where C may be any term (including A). Thus, we can now understand Leibniz as saying that if a term does not exist (that is, is inconsistent or contradictory) it has no attributes (that is, there is nothing which it can truly be said to contain).

VI

I have argued here that Mates and Mondadori have failed to produce a coherent account of contingency that is consistent with Leibniz's containment conception of truth. Nor do I think that one can be produced, while remaining faithful to Leibniz's complete concept theory of individual substances. The complete concept of a particular individual substance, such as Gerald Ford, contains the same component concepts in every possible world, whether or not the complete concept is exemplified in that world. On the containment conception of truth, then, any proposition which is true of Gerald Ford at one world will be true of him at all worlds, and similarly for false propositions about him. All true propositions about Ford are necessarily true and all false propositions about Ford are necessarily false.

One might attempt to fit contingency into all this by appealing to the fact that, for Leibniz, there are an infinite number of complete concepts
very similar to that of Gerald Ford, and that God could have chosen to 
exemplify one of these other concepts in the actual world, rather than 
the one he did. So, one might argue, Gerald Ford might have been a 
Democrat, though in fact he is not, and this is all we need in order to 
claim that the proposition expressed by “Gerald Ford is a Republican” 
is contingent rather than necessary.

This too fails because, according to Leibniz’s complete concept theory, 
nonidentical complete concepts determine nonidentical individuals 
(Corr., May, 1686). Consequently, to try to argue for the contingency of 
Ford’s being a Republican by pointing out that God could have created 
in his place a very similar individual who was a Democrat is no more 
helpful than to point out that Jimmy Carter is a Democrat.

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