

Comments on Adam Harmer's "Leibniz Against the World Soul: Three Versions" for LSNA 2015, Ohio State University.

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In his interesting, helpful paper Adam raises two central questions concerning Leibniz's writings on the World Soul: (i) "Why is Leibniz so concerned about the possibility that God is the soul of the world? What, exactly, is at stake here?" (ii) What are Leibniz's arguments against the view that there is a World Soul and are they all directed at the same target?

In this paper, Adam focuses mostly on the second question and seems to have two main goals in mind. The first goal is to identify what he sees as three distinct lines of argument directed at three distinct targets. (i) The first target, according to Adam, is the view, naturally associated with Averroes, that there is a universal spirit that is connected in some way with individual, finite spirits. (ii) The second target is the view, naturally associated with the Stoics, that the world is an animal or analogous to an animal, something with a soul, an anima and a body. (iii) The third target is the view, possible to associate with Spinoza or Malebranche, that God specifically is the soul of the world; this might go beyond the second target since the second target is consistent with a position according to which the world has a soul other than God. A second goal, in Adam's own words, is to "show that Leibniz does not argue against the World Soul on mathematical grounds" (5).

In support of these two goals, Adam proposes to carefully reexamine a number of crucial passages including sections 195 and 196 of Leibniz's *Theodicy*. Sections 195 and 196 are, I think, by any measure difficult to interpret. Much of the action seems to take place off stage and Leibniz seems to leave it up to his readers to fill in the missing premises and arguments he is apparently taking for granted. Nonetheless one possible Cliff's Notes version of what Leibniz is up to might run something like this:

P1: Creatures with souls are true unities, genuine wholes.

P2: If the world had a soul, the world would be a true unity, a genuine whole.

P3: But the world (unlikely finite creatures) would, as Ric Arthur puts it, "involve infinite quantity, like the sum of a diverging series," and thus cannot be a true unity, a genuine whole.
(mathematical premise)

C1: So, the world cannot have a soul

This Cliff's Notes version would put Leibniz's thinking about infinity, and in particular, a distinction analogous to that between divergent and convergent infinite series, at the heart of his argument against the World Soul. Furthermore, this Cliff's Notes version might reasonably be taken to imply that the targets distinguished by Adam might not really be so distinct after all. If the world cannot have a soul, then a fortiori the world can't be an animal, i.e. an ensouled creature, nor can God be the soul of the world, and, assuming a universal spirit would be a world soul, nor can there be a universal spirit.

Adam, if I've understood him correctly, means to undermine more standard accounts of Leibniz's opposition to the World Soul in part – but only in part, I'm obviously focusing on one bit of Adam's rich paper here for the sake of time – by offering an alternative interpretation of *Theodicy* sections 195 and 196. Adam sees Leibniz, in those sections, as arguing specifically against the Stoic version of the World Soul and as not drawing centrally on his mathematical conclusions about infinities. Adam argues that, at root, Leibniz's argument runs something more like this:

P1: There is no best possible ensouled creature.

P2: If the world were an ensouled creature (i.e. if there were a World Soul), there would therefore be no best possible world.

P3: If there were no best possible world, God would have no reason to create one world rather than another.

P4: If God had no reason to create one world rather than another, God would not create a world.

P5: God did create a world. (whew!)

C: The world is not an ensouled creature (i.e. there is no World Soul).

It's not clear to me how much an argument along these lines would support Adam's suggestion that Leibniz has importantly distinct targets in mind in his attack on the World Soul. The conclusion that the world is not an ensouled creature seems generic enough to rule out not only the "Stoic" position, but also the "Averroist" and "Spinozistic" positions (all in scare quotes). Nonetheless, an argument along these lines might well lend support to Adam's suggestion that Leibniz has distinct lines of argument against the existence of a world soul, and at least one line of argument that is loaded first and foremost in his theodicean concerns rather than his mathematical conclusions.

Insofar as it doesn't rest on Leibniz's mathematical conclusions, however, Adam's version of Leibniz's argument seems to me to put a lot of weight on a rather weak part of Leibniz's position. Why exactly should we think that the perfection of creatures can be increased without limit but the perfection of the world cannot be increased without limit? That is, why should we think that there is no best creature but a best world? Leibniz's philosophy of math at least suggests a strategy for drawing a distinction between ensouled creatures and the world, a distinction that Leibniz could hope to draw on in answering this rather obvious question. Deprived of his mathematical reflections, however, Leibniz would seem to be forced to simply insist that, given that the world exists, there must be a best of all possible worlds on pain of violating the principle of sufficient reason. But that bald insistence might well seem inadequate for at least two reasons.

First, at best, appealing to the principle of sufficient reason in this way would show *that* there must be a best world, it wouldn't explain *how* there can be a best world. And that is, I think, something that really needs explaining. As folks here will know, it was not universally assumed by Leibniz's predecessors that the notion of a best world makes sense. And Leibniz's insistence that the perfection of substances can be increased without limit only makes it harder to see how the perfection of the world cannot be increased without limit. For if the world consists of ensouled creatures, and the perfection of ensouled creatures can be increased without limit, it is, I submit, very hard to see how the perfection of the world cannot be increased without limit. Simply being told that there must be a best of all possible world since God chooses to create doesn't explain *how* there can be a best of all possible worlds. It is a little like asking how Houdini got out of the tank without drowning and being told that must have gotten out of the tank because he is now standing on stage. True enough, but we might still be curious as to how the trick is turned.

Second, it's not clear that Adam's version of the argument, by itself, does show that there must be a best world and the parallel to ensouled creatures helps to bring this out. By Leibniz's lights, God has created both a perfect world and imperfect ensouled creatures, say, for example, my dog Martha. But that in itself implies that God may have a sufficient reason for creating even imperfect things. So why can't God have a sufficient reason for creating even an imperfect world? My own intuition, for what it's worth, is that Leibniz's God does have a sufficient reason for creating imperfect worlds, but that those reasons are defeated by the fact, or the reason, that imperfect worlds are inconsistent with the existence of a perfect world. At any rate, if he isn't going to appeal to mathematical considerations, it seems that Adam's Leibniz will need to appeal to something further in order to explain why God can create imperfect creatures but not an imperfect world.

Given such worries, I'm not yet convinced that Leibniz is best read as offering, in *Theodicy* 195 and 196, a distinct, independent argument directed specifically at a Stoic conception of the World Soul. But perhaps that's not so important. Adam is surely right that it is worth looking more carefully at the specific contexts in which Leibniz actually presents his arguments against the existence of a World Soul. And he is also surely right that we should keep an open mind concerning the possibility that Leibniz has his sights on different targets in different texts. These are clearly worthwhile pursuits. By way of closing therefore, and in the spirit of continuing Adam's inquiry, I might simply restate a few questions his thoughtful discussion has provoked: (i) First, to repeat Adam, why is Leibniz so concerned about the existence of a World Soul? What is at stake here? (ii) Second, does Leibniz, at the end of the day, offer importantly different lines of argument against importantly different targets in his discussions of the World Soul? (iii) Third, what is the relevant difference between infinitely complex organic bodies and our infinitely complex world such that the former can be united with a soul and the latter cannot? (iv) Finally, fourth what is the relevant difference between substances and the world such that the perfection of the former can increase indefinitely but the perfection of the latter cannot?