

Leibniz: The Sufficient Reason Argument

Here is the text of Leibniz's *Sufficient Reason Argument*:

Neither in any single thing, nor in the total aggregate and series of things, can the sufficient reason for their existence be discovered. Let us suppose a book entitled *The Elements of Geometry* to have existed eternally, one edition having always been copied from the preceding. Although you can account for the present copy by a reference to the past copy which it reproduces, yet, however far back you go in this series of reproductions, you can never arrive at a complete explanation. You always will have to ask why at all times these books have existed, that is, why there have been any books at all and why this book in particular. What is true concerning these books is equally true concerning the diverse states of the universe, for here too the following state is in some way a copy of the preceding one (although changing according to certain laws). However far you turn back to antecedent states, you will never discover in any or all of these states the full reason why there is a universe rather than no universe, nor why it is such as it is. You may well suppose the universe to be eternal; yet what you thus posit is nothing but the succession of its states, and you will not find the sufficient reason in any one of them, nor will you get any nearer to accounting rationally for the universe by taking any number of them together. The reason must therefore be sought elsewhere. Things eternal may have no cause of existence, yet a reason for their existence must be conceived. . . . Hence it is evident that even by supposing the universe to be eternal, the recourse to an ultimate reason for the universe beyond the universe . . . cannot be avoided. The reasons for the universe are therefore concealed in some entity not in the universe, which is different from the chain or series of things, the aggregate of which constitutes the universe. (Leibniz, 1697: *On the Radical Origin of Nature*)

To say that a thing is *contingent* means that it depends on something else either for the way that it is or for the fact that it is. To say that a thing is *necessary* means that it does not depend on anything else – it is totally independent. We can summarize the Leibnizian argument like this:

- (1) Every contingent thing has an explanation.
- (2) The explanation for any contingent thing lies in some other thing.
- (3) Every set of contingent things is a contingent thing.
- (4) The world is the set of all contingent things.
- (5) The world is a contingent thing.
- (6) The world has an explanation.
- (7) The explanation for any set of things is not a member of the set.
- (8) The explanation for the world is not a member of the world.
- (9) If any thing is not a member of the world, then it is not a contingent thing.
- (10) The explanation for the world is not a contingent thing.
- (11) If something is not contingent, then it is necessary.
- (12) The explanation for the world is some Necessary Being.
- (13) Therefore, this Necessary Being exists (and it exists necessarily).

Counterparts at Possible Universes

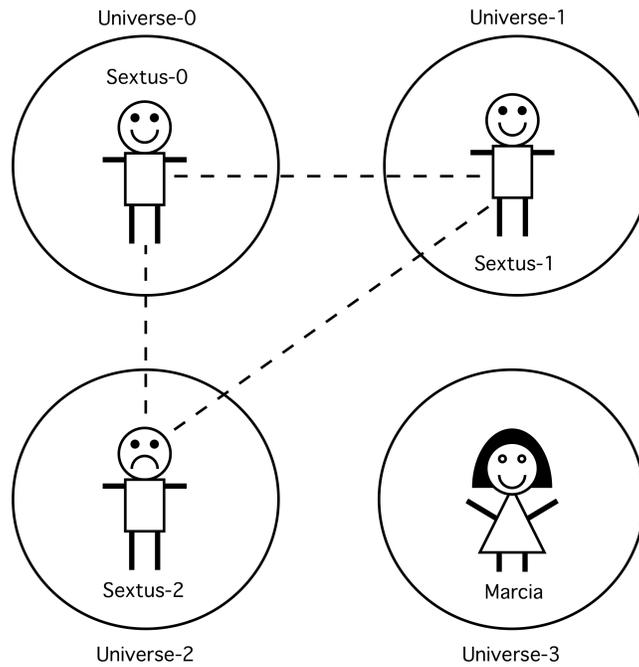


Figure 1. The three Sextuses and one Marcia.

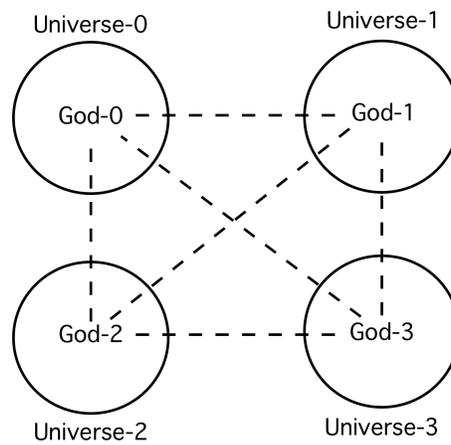


Figure 2. Four distinct Gods at four distinct universes.