Among the theses that Leibniz sent to Arnauld in February 1686, the one that aroused Arnauld’s initial objection was the statement,

Since the individual concept of each person contains once for all everything that will ever happen to him, one sees in it the proofs a priori or reasons for the truth of each event, or why one has occurred rather than another (G D, 12/L-A 5).¹

All the predicates of an individual substance are contained in the concept of that individual, according to Leibniz. This thesis gives rise to many questions about the relation of individuals to their predicates. Why should the predicates be contained in the concept of the individual, and not just in the individual itself? Why does Leibniz infer from the conceptual containment thesis, as he does (DM 14), that all the states of an individual substance are caused by previous states of that individual alone? We will come to these questions, but the prevent investigation is organized around another issue. Today we might call it the issue of “trans-world identity”; Arnauld raised it in these words:

Since it is impossible that I should not always have remained myself, whether I had married or lived in celibacy, the individual concept of myself contained neither of these two states; just as it is well to conclude: this square of marble is the same whether it be at rest or be moved; so neither rest nor motion is contained in its individual concept (G II, 30/L-A 30).

Arnauld affirms trans-world, or counterfactual identity as a reason for rejecting Leibniz’s conceptual containment thesis. He denies that his actual predicate of life-long celibacy is contained in his individual concept on the ground that he is the same individual as one who would, under some possible circumstances, have been married. In his response, as in a number of other places in his writings, Leibniz made clear that he did not accept Arnauld’s assumption of trans-world identity. He held that no individual creature exists in more than one possible world — that if Arnauld, for example, had married, he would not have been Arnauld (or more precisely, that anyone who got

married, in any possible world, would not have been Arnauld [cf. Gr 358]). The issue of trans-world identity being very much alive today, this aspect of Leibniz’s philosophy has received a lot of attention from recent interpreters. But I think there remains (and perhaps always will remain) enough obscurity about his reasons and motives to invite further exploration.

Right at the outset, we should note an important difference between Leibniz and present-day philosophers who are interested in trans-world identity. For the latter, talk about possible worlds serves to explicate the structure, if not the basis, of logical possibility and necessity. What is possible is what is true in (or at) some possible world; what is necessary is what is true in all possible worlds. From this point of view, the denial of trans-world identity seems to entail that no actual individual could possibly have had different properties from those it actually has. To say that Caesar, for example, could have turned back from the Rubicon is to say that there is a possible world in which he does; and that obviously must be a possible world in which he exists. But if there is no trans-world identity, then Caesar exists only in the actual world, in which he crosses the Rubicon. So it seems to follow that he could not have turned back. Leibniz emphatically rejects this conclusion, however. Much of Section 13 of his *Discourse on Metaphysics* is devoted to developing the thesis that, while the crossing of the Rubicon is contained in the individual concept of Julius Caesar, it follows “that it was reasonable and consequently assured that that would happen, but not that it is necessary in itself, nor that the contrary implies a contradiction.”

David Lewis has developed his well-known “counterpart theory” as a way of rejecting trans-world identity without denying that we could have had somewhat different properties from those we actually have. According to Lewis no individual exists in more than one possible world, but there is a “counterpart relation” that obtains among sufficiently similar individuals in different possible worlds. Your counterparts are “people you might have been”, so to speak. To say that it would have been possible for you to have done a certain thing that you did not do is to say that there is a possible world in which a counterpart of yours does it. Several recent interpreters (especially Mondadori, 1975, pp. 94–101) have pointed out that Leibniz has a use of proper names that suggests something like Lewis’s counterpart theory. He speaks, for example, of “possible Adams” in the plural, meaning “possible persons, different from each other, who fit” a general description consisting of a part of the predicates of the first man in the actual world (G II, 41/L–A 45).

Margaret Wilson has argued convincingly, however, that it is a mistake to ascribe to Leibniz a counterpart-theoretical account of possibility and