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Why Do We Study Leibniz (After 300 Years)?

The task of writing a piece on why Leibniz continues to fascinate and perplex us 300 years after his death is one I approach with both enthusiasm and hesitation. I begin with a question? Can our traditional attitude towards the canonical philosophers of the past survive the innovations in historical research that have taken place over the last half century?

The growth of research in the historiography of philosophy, the opportunities for inquires, sharing of knowledge through conferences, discussion, and publications that have been made possible by modern academic life have brought the figures we study closer to us. We understand in ways we did not one hundred years ago, their intellectual contexts, the details of their personal and professional lives, their aims and frustrations, and the reception of their ideas by their contemporaries.

This increase of genuine knowledge has in many ways increased our admiration for the canonical philosophers, whose boldness in taking on received ideas and institutions exposed them to attacks and even persecution and most certainly created stress, anxiety and circumspection. At the same time, it has, brought these figures down to earth. The analytic history of philosophy showed that the Arguments of the Philosophers were always contestable and nearly always faulty or trivial, or at least poorly expounded. We recognise that philosophical publication in past centuries was not subject to peer review in the same way that our published writing is carefully scrutinised for cogency, absence of contradictions, anticipation of all reasonable objections, and adequate accounts of the existing literature.

As we no longer venerate the great military conquerors of the past, we no longer venerate the 'intellectual giant' and the 'Great Man.' Critical Theory, although most philosophers kept it at arms length, revealed the complicity of the great and the good in science and philosophy in supporting or underwriting racist, militaristic, misogynistic, and even fascist policies in ways that could not be ignored and that proved to be a rich mine for historiographical enquiry.

Further, our better understanding of social mechanisms enables us to appreciate that philosophical canonicity—a form of secular sainthood—is arrived at in somewhat accidental ways, not through the expression of personal genius alone. It requires the help of friends and allies, being of the right gender, and having been favoured after death by persons who were themselves influential. The lives of the old philosophers, usually without spouses and children, often absent the passions of attachment, give them a priestly air of special access to higher and deeper truths. As bachelors, their most intimate relationships were secretive and so conducive to guilt and regret, which renders much of their moralising suspect as hypocritical overcompensation, or else they were genuinely indifferent to those things that most of us feel make life worth living.

Further, most of the canonical philosophers have lived in a condition of fear: fear of imprisonment, loss of livelihood, ostracism, persecution or punishment for heresy or

political opinion. Before they acquired university posts, they were financially underwritten and protected by their patrons and allies with whom they had to remain on good terms. Their writing often seems to reveal a struggle between what they believe deep down and the need to please or not to offend.

We are no longer idolators. The idolator supposes that the object of their worship expresses itself in obscure formulations that conceal the perfect coherence and hint at the infinite complexity of his thought. The worshipper must devote their life to the holy task of interpreting, explaining, and justifying the idol's words. So the philosopher of the past is not a god, and idolatry is not to be confused with adherence to the principle of charity. The principle of charity says that even when our philosopher is ambivalent, or has no coherent doctrine, or holds morally abhorrent opinions, we must try, as scholars, to understand and to explain why he or she is mixed up, or can't solve their own problem, or why they hold normative views we now find dubious or repugnant.

II.

How then should we regard the subjects of our study. Perhaps we could take a cue from the title of the first volume of Elena Ferrante's series of novels about Neopolitan youth of the middle of the 20th century: *My Brilliant Friend*. We come to love our subjects as they are, with their qualities and their difficulties. They are exasperating at times, even alienating for longish periods when we don't care about them and have nothing more to say to or about them, but inevitably they pull us back into their orbit, and then lead the way again, taking us into new regions of thinking and perceiving. When we are able to transmit our own experiences to our students, there is a second level of pleasure involved.

But what particular literary and philosophical qualities draw the researcher to Leibniz? What is the basis of the attraction? And what are the difficulties we experience with him? I will mention four outstanding features: Leibniz's relationship to the Scientific Revolution; his literary qualities; his intellectual acuity; and his commitment to human welfare.

The Scientific Revolution

Leibniz came onto the scene in the midst of the Galilean-Cartesian revolution that rejected the Aristotelean accounts of primary matter, forms and manifest and occult qualities, along with Aristotelian-Ptolemaic geocentrism. It substituted a new ontology of particles in motion, the notion of 'laws of nature,' and a vastly expanded universe of multiple worlds. Its ontology, a revival of the ancient system of the Epicureans, was minimalistic and restrictive, but at the same time trade and travel and the enhanced interest in natural history and geology, were revealing the complexity of living nature and of the composition of the planet. Leibniz inserted himself into these developments in a number of ways. He accepted the corpuscularian-mechanical philosophy as a convenient scheme, but not as metaphysically fundamental; he sought improvements to mathematical physics in the laws of collision and dynamics, and to the vortex theory. He placed the sciences of life, as distinct

from the sciences of nonliving matter, firmly in the center of experimental and theoretical enquiry, and he undertook investigations of fossils and geology which stimulated the great breakthroughs of the 18th century in understanding the history of the earth and its great age.

His view was that the physics of solid bodies with measurable weights and speeds and ascertainable dimensions and directions treated phenomenon that were in some way produced by individual entities without dimensions, or spatial locations, or movement, or causal influence. They were nevertheless undergoing processes of change, attributable to their states of awareness and appetition, and the appearances of the visible, tangible common world depended upon this unfolding. He was clearly right in what he denied: the corpuscularian image of a world of tiny billiard balls with determinate boundaries in collision left too many questions unanswered (what held the billiard balls together? How did they stick to other billiard balls to form solid objects? How could collision mechanics explain orbital motion?) And even if his inference to the existence of monads with all their characteristics and their hierarchical organisation was the wrong account of subatomic reality, we do now believe that space, time, solidity, weight, and causality are in some manner derivative and not primitives, and that entities perceive or communicate with one another in ways that do not accord with the rules of the visible world: that causes must be prior to effects and be mediated by matter.

His contribution to the life sciences was to bring the subvisible world of living beings into prominence and to correct the Cartesian thesis that nonhuman animals were insensate machines. In his *Protogaea*, he speculated on....

Literary Qualities

Second, Leibniz employs vivid and memorable imagery that resonates with us at deep levels; his thought world is one of correspondences and analogies, echoes and mirrors, folds, sparks, and seeds. His writing is free for the most part of technical, scholastic vocabulary. In the *New Essays* and in the *Theodicy* the reader encounters memorable instances, anecdotes and analogies: the brain the size of a mill, the statue of Hercules, the ocean waves, sound of the mill, the uneasiness of our clocks. The images of development, evolution in its original sense, and of course harmony are resonant and rich. The opening passages of the *Monadology* seem to invite the reader into a mysterious new world of souls alive and twinkling like separate stars but in a nonspatial array before we are invited into another world—the fishpond teeming with life in smaller and smaller formats without end.

Incisiveness

Leibniz is a shrewd reader of Hobbes, Descartes, Spinoza and Locke. Although his reactions to them often strike us as harsh and as based on isolated portions of their thought, he appears to grasp what is going on in another philosopher, what their central preoccupation. In Descartes, he detects arrogance mixed with a kind of fatalism along with the defense of a deeply implausible account of animal machines and separable souls. In Hobbes, he finds an equally implausible account of the material mind and a politics of fear; in Spinoza he finds an impersonal God and defense of a secular state; in Locke an atomist's ontology and moral theory. Regardless of the fact that we may applaud some or all of these attitudes and positions, we have to admit that Leibniz—despite his self-avowed cursory reading habits—grasps the centrality and significance of these positions and even why a rival philosopher would hold them, whilst zeroing in on their weaknesses without the tedious longuets of their official opponents.

Welfarism

Fourth, Leibniz's interest in technological progress, to enhancing efficiency and objectivity in the law and to human welfare in his schemes for the remediation of poverty and illness. These interests were lifelong and exceptional in the history of philosophy. Leibniz was a proponent of applied as well as pure philosophy. Following his recent biographer, we could mention his hopes and plans for the reform of the imperial constitution, the reorganization of the legal system, state supported schools, vocational training, poverty-reduction, health improvement, pensions, and life insurance.ⁱ The universal language, the reform of jurisprudence, and the advancement of pure and applied science and mathematics, were to have as their beneficiaries specifically those deprived of resources, opportunities, and justice.ⁱⁱ 'One must, Leibniz said, 'furnish the poor with the means of earning their livelihood, not only by using charity and charitable foundations to this end, but also by taking an interest in agriculture, buy furnishing to artisans materials and a market, by educating them to make their productions better, and finally by putting an end to idleness and abusive practice in manufactures and in commerce.'ⁱⁱⁱ

III.

Now to the difficulties: I will classify these under three headings: the problem of projection of the monad world into the world of experience; the position on evil and the associated doctrine of immortality; and theocratic political philosophy.

First, it is now generally agreed that there is no way of directly translating the metaphysical level of reality which is nonspatial, nontemporal, and populated by appetitive, perceptive nonextended entities into the phenomenal world consisting of tiny organisms some which coalesce into hierarchically organised living structures such as individual plants and animals. Nor is it really possible to understand how objects such as billiard balls and metal screws are actually composed of microorganisms existing in stable, proximal relationships. As noted, we can endorse Leibniz intuition that our world is in fact a well-founded phenomenon in a way that none of his contemporaries grasped as clearly as he did, but decades of research have not given us the transformation rules we would need. Perhaps there are no transformation rules and contemporary physics will face this problem as well?

Second, the doctrine that an omnipotent and benevolent God exists, created the world, and does not will or permit any true evil—any evil from which a greater good does not spring. This doctrine meets with incredulity from a number of groups. First, there are those philosophers who find the notion of a unique creator of the universe endowed with superhuman but nevertheless human-like cognitive powers, intentions, and moral attitudes incredible. Second, there are those who do not find this notion incredible, but who believe that physical and moral evil tsunamis, plagues, earthquakes, the loss of life through freezing, burning and starving and the agency of torturers, perpetrators of genocide and casual sadists argues against the existence of a God or at least in favour of Manichaeism. Third, there are philosophers who apparently do not find the notion of a unique psychologically complex creator implausible, but who reject the claim that human reason can establish that both physical upsets and wicked human agency always lead to greater goods. They would prefer to understand the divine will as inscrutable.

Leibniz's notion that divine justice—retribution for wickedness on the part of human beings that goes unpunished during their lifetimes—must be targeted at naturally immortal persons whose metabolism as we would think of it life, persists in damped down form, rather than organisms revived from the dead state is not acceptable to the majority of present day theists who would also question the allied assumption that retribution implies the imposition of physical pain.

Third, there is Leibniz's

ⁱ Maria Rosa Antognazza, *Leibniz: An Intellectual Biography*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, p. 196.

ⁱⁱ *Ibid.*, p. 210.

ⁱⁱⁱ Ibid., p. 106.