



Leibniz Alfred William Benn

G. W. Leibniz (1646-1716), son of a professor at the University of Leipzig, is marked by some of the distinguishing intellectual characters of the German genius....At once a mathematician, a physicist, a historian, a metaphysician, and a diplomatist, he went to the bottom of whatever subject he touched, and enriched all his multifarious studies with new views or with new facts. And as with other great countrymen of his, the final end of all this curiosity and interest was to combine and reconcile. One of his ambitions was to create a universal language of philosophy, by whose means its problems were to be made a matter of mathematical demonstration; another to harmonise ancient with modern speculation; a third—the most chimerical of all—to compose the differences between Rome and Protestantism; a fourth—partly realised long after his time—to unite the German Calvinists with the Lutherans. In politics he tried, with equal unsuccess, to build up a Confederation of the Rhine as a barrier against Louis XIV., and to divert the ambition of Louis himself from encroachments on his neighbours to the conquest of Egypt.

It seems probable that no intellect of equal power was ever applied in modern times to the service of philosophy. And this power is demonstrated, not, as with other metaphysicians, by constructions of more or less contestable value, however dazzling the ingenuity they may display, but by contributions of the first order to positive science. It is now agreed that Leibniz discovered the differential calculus independently of Newton; and, what is more, that the formulation by which alone it has been made available for fruitful application was his exclusive invention. In physics he is a pioneer of the conservation of energy. In geology he starts the theory that our planet began as a glowing molten mass derived from the sun; and the modern theory of evolution is a special application of his theory of development.

Intellect alone, however, does not make a great philosopher; character also is required; and Leibniz's character was quite unworthy of his genius. Ambitious and avaricious, a courtier and a time-server, he neither made truth for its own sake a paramount object, nor would he keep on terms with those who cherished a nobler ideal. After cultivating Spinoza's acquaintance, he joined in the cry of obloquy raised after his death, and was mean enough to stir up religious prejudice against Newton's theory of gravitation. Of the calamity that embittered his closing days we may say with confidence that it could not possibly have befallen Spinoza. On the accession of the Elector of Hanover to the English crown as George I., Leibniz sought for an invitation to the Court of St. James. Apparently the prince had not found him very satisfactory as a State official, and had reason to believe that Leibniz would have liked to exchange his office of historiographer at Hanover for a better appointment at Vienna. Greatness in other departments could not recommend one whom he knew only as a negligent and perhaps unfaithful servant to the favour of such an illiterate master. Anyhow, the English appointment was withheld, and the worn-out encyclopaedist succumbed to disease and vexation combined. The only mourner at his funeral was his secretary, Eckhardt, who hastened to solicit the reversion of the offices left vacant by his chief's decease.

A single theory of Leibniz has attained more celebrity than any one utterance of any other philosopher; but that fame is due to the undying fire in which it has been enveloped by the

mocking irony of Voltaire. Everything is for the best in the best of all possible worlds. Such is the famous text as a satire on which *Candide* was composed. Yet whatever value Voltaire's objections to optimism may possess tells nearly as much against Voltaire himself as against his unfortunate butt. For, after all, believing as he did in a God who combined omnipotence with perfect goodness he could not any more than Leibniz evade the obligation of reconciling the divine character with the divine work. On *a priori* grounds the German philosopher seems to have an incontrovertible case. A perfect Being must have made the best possible world. The only question is what we mean by goodness and by possibility. Spinoza had solved the problem by identifying goodness with existence. It is enough that the things we call evil are possible; the infinite Power of nature would be a self-contradiction were they not realised. Leibniz rejects the pantheistic position in terms, but nearly admits it in practice. Evil for him means imperfection, and if God made a world at all it was bound to be imperfect. The next step was to call pain an imperfection, which suggests a serious logical deficiency in the optimist; for, although in certain circumstances the production of pain argues imperfection in the operator, we are not entitled to argue that wherever there is pain there must be imperfection. Another plea is the necessity of pain as a punishment for crime, or, more generally, as a result of moral freedom. Such an argument is only open to the believers in free-will. A world of free and responsible agents, they urge, is infinitely more valuable than a world of automata; and it is not too dearly purchased even at the cost of such suffering as we witness. The argument is not very convincing; for liberty of choice in a painless world is quite conceivable. But, be it a good or bad argument, although it might appeal to Voltaire, who believed in free-will, it could not decently be used by Leibniz, who was a determinist of the strictest type. To make this clear we must now turn to his metaphysical system.

Bacon, Descartes, and Spinoza, disagreeing widely on other subjects, were agreed in discountenancing the study of final causes: Bacon, apparently, from dislike of the idea that the perfect adaptation of all things to the service of man rendered superfluous any efforts to make them more serviceable still; Descartes from his devotion to the mathematical method which was more applicable to a system of mechanical causation; Spinoza for the same reason, and also from his disbelief in a personal God. Leibniz, on the contrary, felt deeply impressed by a famous passage in Plato's *Phaedo*, where Socrates, opposing the philosophy of teleology to the philosophy of mechanism, desiderates an explanation of nature as designed with a view to the highest good. But Leibniz did not go so far as Plato. Mediating between the two methods, he taught that all is done for the best, but also that all is done through an unbroken series of efficient causes. At the same time, these causes are only material in appearance; in reality they are spiritual beings. There is no such thing as dead matter; the universe consists of living forces all through. The general idea of force probably came from that infinite Power of which, according to Spinoza, the whole universe is at once the product and the expression; or it may have been suggested by Plato's incidental identification of Being with Action. But Leibniz found his type of force in human personality, which, following the lead of Aristotle rather than of Plato, he conceived as an Entelechy, or realised Actuality, and a First Substance. After years of anxious reflection he chose the far happier name of Monad, a term originally coined by Bruno, but not, as would appear, directly borrowed from him by the German metaphysician.

According to Leibniz, the monads or ultimate elements of existence are constituted by the two essential properties of psychic life, perception and appetency. In this connection two points have to be made clear. What he calls bare monads—i.e., the components of what is known as inorganic matter—although percipient, are not conscious of their perceptions; in his language they do not apperceive. And he endeavours to prove that such a mentality is possible by a reference to our own experience. We hear the roaring of waves on the seashore, but we do not

hear the sound made by the falling of each particle of water. And yet we certainly must perceive it in some way or other, since the total volume of sound is made up of those inaudible impacts. He overlooks the conceivable alternative that the immediate antecedent of our auditory sensations is a cerebral disturbance, and that this must attain a certain volume in order to produce an effect on our consciousness. The other point is that the appetency of a monad does not mean an active impulse, but a search for more and more perceptions, a continuous widening of its cognitive range. In short, each monad is a little Leibniz for ever increasing the sum of its knowledge.

At no stage does that knowledge come from experience. The monad has no windows, no communication of any kind with the external world. But each reflects the whole universe, knowing what it knows by mere introspection. And each reflects all the others at a different angle, the angles varying from one another by infinitesimal degrees, so that in their totality they form a continuous series of differentiated individuals. And the same law of infinitesimal differentiation is observed by the series of progressive changes through which the monads are ever passing, so that they keep exact step, the continuity of existence being unbroken in the order of succession as in the order of co-existence. Evidently there is no place for free-will in such a system; and that Leibniz, with his relentless fatalism, should not only admit the eternal punishment of predestined sinners, but even defend it as morally appropriate, obliges us to condemn his theology as utterly irrational or utterly insincere.

In this system animal and human souls are conceived as monads of superior rank occupying a central and commanding position among a multitude of inferior monads constituting what we call their bodies, and changing *pari passu* with them, the correspondence of their respective states being, according to Leibniz, of such a peculiarly intimate character that the phenomena of sensation and volition seem to result from a causal reaction instead of from a mechanical adjustment such as we can imagine to exist between two clocks so constructed and set as to strike the same hour at the same time. This theory of the relations between body and soul is known to philosophy as the system of pre-established harmony.

It may be asked how every monad can possibly reflect every other monad when we do not know what is passing in our own bodies, still less what is passing all over the universe. The answer consists in a convenient distinction between clear and confused perceptions, the one constituting our actual and the other our potential knowledge. A more difficult problem is to explain how any particular monad—Leibniz or another—can consistently be a monadologist rather than a solipsist believing only in its own existence. Here, as usual, the *Deus ex Machina* comes in. Following Descartes, I think of God as a perfect Being whose idea involves his existence, with, of course, the power, will, and wisdom to create the best possible world—a universe of monads—which, again, by its perfect mutual adjustments, proves that there is a God. A more serious, and indeed absolutely insuperable, objection arises from the definition of the monads as nothing but mutually reflecting entities. For even an infinity of little mirrors with nothing but each other to reflect must at once collapse into absolute vacuity. And with their disappearance their creator also disappears. God, the supreme monad, we are told, has only clear perceptions; but the clearness is of no avail when he has nothing to perceive but an absolute blank. Leibniz rejected the objectivity of time and space; yet the hollow infinity of those blank forms seems, in his philosophy, to have reached the consciousness of itself.

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