



The Philosophy of Leibniz

Alfred Weber

The life of Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz, like his doctrine, forms the counterpart of Spinoza's. The illustrious Jew of Amsterdam was poor, neglected, and persecuted even to his dying day, while Leibniz knew only the bright side of life. Most liberally endowed with all the gifts of nature and of fortune, and as eager for titles and honors as for knowledge and truth, he had a brilliant career as a jurist, diplomat, and universal savant. His remarkable success is reflected in the motto of his theodicy: Everything is for the best in the best of possible worlds. He was born at Leipsic in 1646, and died on the 14th of November, 1716, as Librarian and Court Counsellor of the Duke of Hanover, Privy Counsellor, Imperial Baron, etc., etc.

His principal philosophical writings are: *Meditationes de cognitione, veritate et ideis* (1684); *Lettres sur la question si l'essence du corps consiste dans l'etendue* (in the *Journal des savants*, 1691); *Nouveaux humains* (in reply to Locke's *Essay*); *Essais de Theodicee sur la bonte' de Dieu, la liberte de l'homme et l'origine du mal* (1710), dedicated to Queen Sophia Charlotte of Prussia; *La monadologie* (1714); *Principes de la nature et de la grace, fondees en raison* (1714); finally, his *Correspondence*.¹

Leibniz opposes to the dualism of extended or unconscious substance and inextended or conscious substance his theory of monads or inextended and more or less conscious substances. It seems that he derived the expression and the conception from Bruno's *De monade and De triplici minimo*² (1591).

Both the physical and mental realms contain a series of phenomena which do not depend exclusively either on thought or on extension. If the mind is conscious thought and nothing but that, how shall we explain the countless minute perceptions (*perceptions petites*)³ which baffle all analysis, those vague and confused feelings which cannot be classified, in short, everything in the soul of which we are not conscious?⁴ The soul has states during which its perceptions are not distinct, as in a profound, dreamless sleep, or in a swoon. During these states the soul either does not exist at all, or it exists in a manner analogous to the body, that is, without consciousness of self. Hence there is in the soul something other than conscious thought: it contains an unconscious element, which forms a connecting link between the soul and the physical world.⁵

Moreover, what are attraction, repulsion, heat, and light, if matter is inert extension, and nothing but that? Cartesianism can neither deny nor explain these facts. Consistency demands that it boldly deny, on the one hand, the existence of order and life in the corporeal world, on the other, the presence in the soul of all ideas, sensations, and volitions which temporarily sink below the threshold of consciousness and attention, and reappear at the slightest inner or outer solicitation. It must unhesitatingly affirm that there is nothing inextended in the material world, and nothing unconscious in the spiritual world. But that would be to fly in the face of facts, and to assert an absurdity. No; extension, as the Cartesians conceive it, cannot of itself explain sensible phenomena. It is synonymous with passivity, inertia, and death, while everything in nature is action, movement, and life. Hence, unless we propose to explain life by death, and being by non-being, we must of necessity suppose that the essence of body consists of something different from extension.

And, indeed, does not the state of extension, which constitutes the nature of body, presuppose

an effort or force that extends itself, a power both of resistance and expansion? Matter is essentially resistance, and resistance means activity. Behind the (extended) state there is the act which constantly produces it, renews it (extension). A large body moves with more difficulty than a small body; this is because the larger body has greater power of resistance. What seems to be inertia, or a lack of power is in reality more intense action, a more considerable effort. Hence, the essence of corporeality is not extension, but the force of extension, or active force.⁶

Cartesian physics deals with inert masses and lifeless bodies only, and is therefore identical with mechanics and geometry; but nature can be explained only by a metaphysical notion that is higher than a purely mathematical and mechanical notion; and even the principles of mechanics, that is, the first laws of motion, have a higher origin than that of pure mathematics.⁷ This higher notion is the idea of FORCE. It is this power of resistance that constitutes the essence of matter. As to extension, it is nothing but an abstraction; it presupposes something that is extended, expanded, and continued. Extension is the diffusion of this “something.” Milk, for example, is an extension or diffusion of whiteness; the diamond, an extension or diffusion of hardness; body in general, the extension of materiality. Hence, it is plain that there is something in the body anterior to extension⁸ (the force of extension). True metaphysics does not recognize the useless and inactive masses of which the Cartesians speak. There is action everywhere. No body without movement, no substance without effort.⁹

Only the effects of force are perceptible; in itself it is an insensible and immaterial thing. Now force constitutes the essence of matter; hence matter is in reality immaterial in its essence. This paradox, which is also found in Leibniz, Bruno, and Plotinus, in principle overcomes the dualism of the physical and mental worlds. Though force forms the essence of that which is extended, it is itself inextended; it is therefore indivisible and simple; it is original; for composite things alone are derived and have become what they are; finally, it is indestructible, for a simple substance cannot be decomposed. A miracle alone could destroy it.

Thus far Leibniz speaks of force as Spinoza speaks of substance, and there seems to be merely a verbal difference between him and his predecessor. But here their paths diverge. Spinoza’s “substance” is infinite and unique; Leibniz’s “force” is neither one nor the other. If there were but one single substance in the world, this one substance would also be the only force; it alone would be able to act by itself, and everything else would be inert, powerless, passive, or rather, would not exist at all. Now, the reverse is actually true. We find that minds act by themselves, with the consciousness of their individual responsibility; we likewise find that every body resists all other bodies, and consequently constitutes a separate force. Shall we say, in favor of Spinozism, that the indwelling forces of things are so many parts of the one force? But that cannot be, since force is essentially indivisible. By denying the infinite diversity of individual forces, the abstract monism of Spinoza reverses the very nature of things, and becomes a pernicious doctrine.¹⁰ Where there is action there is active force; now there is action in all things; each constitutes a separate center of activity; hence there are as many simple, indivisible, and original forces as there are things.

These original forces or monads may be compared to physical points or to mathematical points; but they differ from the former in that they have no extension, and from the latter, in that they are objective realities. Leibniz calls them metaphysical points or points of substance¹¹ (they are both exact, like mathematical points, and real, like physical points), formal points, formal atoms, substantial forms (in scholastic language), to indicate that each constitutes an individual, independent of all the other monads, acting of itself and depending only on itself in form, character, and entire mode of life.

Whatever happens in the monad comes from it alone; no external cause can produce modifications in it. Since it is endowed with spontaneous activity, and receives no influence from without, it differs from all other monads, and differs from them forever. It cannot be identified with anything; it eternally remains what it is (*principium distinctionis*). It has no windows by which anything can enter or pass out.¹² Since each monad differs from and excludes all the rest, it is “like a separate world, self-sufficient, independent of every other creature, embracing the infinite, expressing the universe.”¹³ It follows that two individual things cannot be perfectly

alike in the world.

But here a serious objection arises. If each monad constitutes a separate world, independent of all other beings; if none has “windows” by which anything can enter or depart; if there is not the slightest reciprocal action between individuals, - what becomes of the universe and its unity? Spinoza sacrificed the reality of individuals to the principle of unity; does not Leibniz go to the other extreme? Are there not, according to his assumption, as many universes as there are atoms? This difficulty, which necessarily confronts all atomistic theories, Leibniz circumvents rather than solves. He has broken up, shattered, and pulverized the monolithic universe of Spinoza: how will he be able to cement these infinitesimal fragments together again, to reconstruct the universe?

He finds the synthetic principle in the analogy of monads and in the notion of pre-established harmony. Though each monad differs from all the rest, there is an analogy and a family resemblance, so to speak, between them. They resemble each other in that all are endowed with perception and desire or appetite, - Schopenhauer would say, will. Those on the lower stages in the scale of things, as well as the highest and most perfect monads, are forces, entelechies, and souls.¹⁴ Souls alone exist, and that which we call extension or body is nothing but a confused perception, a phenomenon, a sensible manifestation of effort, that is to say, of the immaterial. Thus the dualism of soulless matter and denaturalized mind is forever overcome. “Whatever there is of good in the hypotheses of Epicurus and of Plato, of the greatest materialists and the greatest idealists, is here combined.”¹⁵ Matter signifies a relation, a negative relation; it does not express a mode of the monad’s positive being, as the negative expression impenetrable very well indicates; thought (perception) and tendency (appetition) are positive attributes, permanent modes of being, not only of the higher monads but of all without exception. Leibniz emphatically maintains that perception is universal,¹⁶ and answers the objection that beings inferior to man do not think, by the statement that “there are infinite degrees of perception, and perception is not necessarily sensation.”¹⁷ The more the Cartesians persisted in denying all analogy between human thought and the mental phenomena in animals, the more he inclined towards this paradoxical conception. The perceptions of lower beings are infinitely minute, confused, and unconscious; those of man are clear and conscious: that is the entire difference between soul and mind, perception and apperception.

The perceptions of the monad do not, it is true, extend beyond itself. Having no “windows by which anything can enter or depart,” it can only perceive itself. We ourselves, the higher monads, do not perceive anything except our own being, and that alone we know immediately. The real world is wholly inaccessible to us, and the so-called world is merely the involuntary projection of what takes place within ourselves. If, notwithstanding, we know what takes place outside of us, if we have an (indirect) perception of the external world, it is because we are like all monads, representatives of the universe, and because, consequently, that which takes place in us is the reproduction in miniature of that which takes place on the large scale in the macrocosm. Since the monad directly perceives itself alone and its own contents, it follows that the more adequate an image it is itself, the more complete will its perception of the universe be. The better a monad represents the universe, the better it represents itself. If the human soul has a clear and distinct idea of the world, it is because it is a more exact and more faithful image (idea) of the universe than the soul of the animal and the soul of the plant.¹⁸

All monads represent and perceive, or, in a word, reproduce the universe, but they reproduce it in different degrees, and each in its own way. In other terms, there is a gradation in the perfection of the monads. In the hierarchy thus formed, the most perfect monads rule, the less perfect ones obey. Accordingly, we must distinguish between physical individuals, such as nature offers, and the metaphysical individuals or monads composing them. A plant or an animal is not a monad and individual in the metaphysical sense, but a combination of monads, of which one rules and the others obey. The central monad is what is called the soul of the plant, animal, or man; the subordinate monads grouped around it form what we call body. “Each living being,” as Leibniz expressly states,¹⁹ “has a ruling entelechy, which is the soul in the animal, but the members of this living body are full of other living beings, — plants, animals,

— each of which has also its entelechy or governing soul.” “Each monad,” he also says,²⁰ “is a mirror of the universe, from its point of view, and accompanied by a multitude of other monads composing its organic body of which it is the ruling monad.”²¹

However, by virtue of the autonomy of the monads, this dominating influence of the central monad is purely ideal; the latter does not really act upon the governed monads.²² The obedience of the governed monads is, in turn, quite spontaneous. They do not subordinate themselves to the ruling monad because this forces them to do so, but because their own nature counsels them to do it.²³ In the formation of organisms, the lower monads group themselves around the more perfect monads, which, in turn, spontaneously group themselves around the central monad. This process might be compared to the construction of a temple in which the columns spontaneously put themselves in the desired place, with the capital pointing upwards and the pedestal at the bottom. An inorganic body, a rock, or a liquid mass is likewise an aggregation of monads, but without a ruling monad. Such bodies are not inanimate; for each of the monads composing them is both soul and body; but they seem inanimate because their constitutive monads, being of like nature, do not obey a governing monad, but hold themselves in equilibrium, so to speak.

After these preliminaries, we expect Leibniz to solve the problem of the reciprocal action of soul and body in the simplest and easiest manner. Thought and extension are not substances which repel and exclude each other, but different attributes of one and the same substance. Hence, nothing seems more natural than to assume a direct connection between intellectual phenomena and the facts of the physiological world. That is not the case, however, and the metaphysics of Leibniz finds itself as powerless as Cartesianism before this important problem. The connection just mentioned would be perfectly apparent if the human individual were a single monad, having as its immaterial essence the soul, and as its sensible manifestation, the body. If by body we meant the material element inhering in the central monad (for it must be remembered that each monad, and consequently also the central monad or the highest soul, is both soul and body), nothing would be more proper than to speak of a mutual action between soul and body. But, as we have just shown, the physical individual is not an isolated monad, but a central monad surrounded by other monads, and it is the latter, or this group of subordinate souls, which, strictly speaking, constitute the body of the individual. Now, the monads have no windows; within one and the same monad, the ruling monad, for example, there may and must be a causal relation between its successive states; such a relation, however, is impossible between two different monads.

Hence a real and direct action of the dominant monad upon the subordinate monad, or of soul upon body, is as impossible in Leibniz’s system as in that of Descartes. This action is merely apparent. In sensation the soul seems to suffer the influence of the body, and the parts of the, body, in turn, move as though their movements were determined by the volitions of the soul. As a matter of fact, neither one nor the other is affected by something external to it. No soul state, no volition, for example, can “penetrate” the monads constituting the body; hence the soul does not act directly upon the body; our arms are not moved by an act of will. Nothing in the body can “penetrate” the dominant monad: hence, no impressions enter the soul through the senses, but all our ideas are innate. Body and soul seem to act on each other; the former moves when the latter wills it, the latter perceives and conceives when the former receives a physical impression, and this is due to a pre-established harmony, owing to which the monads constituting the body and the ruling monad necessarily agree, just as two perfectly regulated clocks always show the same time.²⁴

The theory of pre-established harmony differs from the occasionalistic system in an important point. The latter assumes a special divine intervention every time the soul and the physical organism are to agree. God regulates the soul by the body or the body by the volitions of the soul, as a watchmaker constantly regulates one clock by the other. According to Leibniz, the harmony between the movements of the body and the states of the soul is the effect of the Creator’s perfect work, as the perpetual agreement between two well-constructed watches results from the skill of the mechanic who has constructed them. Those who assume that the Creator constantly intervenes in his work, regard God as an unskillful watchmaker, who cannot

make a perfect machine, but must continually repair what he has made. Not only does God not intervene at every moment, but he never intervenes. "Mr. Newton and his followers," says Leibniz,⁽²⁵⁾ "have a curious opinion of God and his work. According to them, God must wind up his watch from time to time; otherwise it would cease to move. He had not sufficient insight to make it run forever. Nay, God's machine is so imperfect, according to them, that he is obliged to clean it, from time to time, by an extraordinary concourse, and even to repair it as a watchmaker repairs his work; the oftener he is obliged to mend it and to set it right, the poorer a mechanic he is." . . . "According to my system, bodies act as if there were no souls, and souls act as if there were no bodies, and both act as if each influenced the other."²⁶

Perhaps,²⁷ from the theological point of view, Leibniz's theory of pre-established harmony is preferable to the hypothesis of the assistance or perpetual concourse of God, but it does not satisfy the curiosity of the philosopher any more than does the Cartesian theory. To say that body and soul agree in their respective states by virtue of a pre-established harmony is to say that a thing is because it is. Leibniz conceals his ignorance behind a science that rises above all the theories of the past. When we consider how extravagantly Leibniz's friends and Leibniz himself eulogized his system, we hardly know what to wonder at most, the delusion of our philosopher or the simplicity of his admirers.

We have found, with Leibniz, that monads reflect the universe in different degrees; that some monads reflect it better than others. This pre-supposes the existence of a lowest monad, which reproduces the universe in the most elementary manner possible, and a highest monad, which expresses it in a perfect manner: a positive and a superlative. Between these two extremes we have an infinite chain of intermediate monads. Each intermediate monad forms a different point, and, consequently, a different point of view, on the line connecting the extremes; each, as such, differs from all the rest. But the monads are infinite in number. Hence we have on the ideal line between the lowest and the highest monad, i.e., on a line that is limited on all sides and is not infinite, an infinity of different points of view. From this it follows that the distances separating these points of view are infinitely small, that the difference between two adjacent monads is imperceptible (discrimen indiscernible).

The principle of continuity²⁸ removes the gaps which are supposed to exist between the mineral and vegetable kingdoms, and the vegetable and animal kingdoms.²⁹ There are no gaps, no absolute oppositions in nature; rest is an infinitely minute movement; darkness, infinitely little light; the parabola, an ellipse one of whose foci is infinitely distant; perception in the plant, an infinitely confused thought.³⁰ This conception bridges the chasm which the Cartesians made between brutes and man. Brutes are merely imperfect men, plants imperfect animals. Leibniz does not, however, regard man as a product of evolution. Far from it. Each monad remains eternally what it is, and the soul of the plant cannot therefore be transformed into an animal soul, nor an animal soul into a human soul. But his doctrine of the pre-existence of monads, and his teaching that they develop indefinitely, logically culminate in the theory of transformation. "I recognize," he writes³¹ to Des Maizeaux,³² "that not only the souls of brutes, but all monads or simple substances from which the composite phenomena are derived are as old as the world;" and a few lines above he says, "I believe that the souls of men have pre-existed, not as reasonable souls but as merely sensitive souls, which did not reach the superior stage of reason until the man whom the soul was to animate was conceived." The view that man pre-existed in the animal could not be stated with greater clearness. It even seems as though Leibniz's "souls" pre-exist in the inorganic world, like so many germs. In its state of pre-existence, he says, in substance, the monad which is to become a soul is absolutely naked,³³ or without a body; that is to say, it is not surrounded by that group of subordinate monads which will form its organs, and, consequently, exists in a kind of unconscious state. Hence, the monads destined to become either animal or human souls wholly resemble inanimate bodies, from the beginning of the world until they are incorporated.

The passage of the monads into bodies (incarnation) cannot be conceived as a metempsychosis or a metasomatosis, if we mean by these two terms the introduction of the soul into a body formed without its assistance. Nor can future life be considered in such a light. By virtue of the

law of pre-established harmony, the development of the soul runs parallel with that of the body, and although there is no real and immediate communion between the central monad and the subordinate monads constituting its body, there is an ideal correlation between the latter and the soul. With the reservation made above, it is correct to call the soul the architect of the body. A soul cannot give itself any body whatsoever, nor can any body serve as its organ.³⁴

Each soul has its body. But though there is no metempsychosis, i.e., no passage of souls into bodies already formed, there is metamorphosis, and perpetual metamorphosis.³⁵ The soul changes its body only gradually and by degrees.³⁶ Owing to the principle of continuity, nature never makes leaps, but there are insensible transitions everywhere and in everything.

Future life cannot be incorporeal. Human souls and all other souls are never without bodies; God alone, being pure action, is wholly without body. Since the central monad is “primitive” like all monads, it cannot be created *ex nihilo* upon its entrance into actual life, nor annihilated at its departure. “What we call generation is development or increase; what we call death is envelopment and diminution. Strictly speaking, there is neither generation nor death, and it may be said, that not only is the soul indestructible, but also the animal itself, although its machine is often partially destroyed.”³⁷ As regards rational souls, it may be assumed that they will pass “to a grander scene of action” at the close of their present life. Moreover, their immortality is not the result of a particular divine favor or a privilege of human nature, but a metaphysical necessity, a universal phenomenon embracing all the realms of nature. Just as each monad is as old as the world, so, too, each one “is as durable, as stable, and as absolute as the universe of creatures itself.”³⁸ The plant and the grub are no less eternal than man, the angels, and the archangels.³⁹ Death is but a turning-point in the eternal life, a stage in the never-ending development of the monad.

In the system of Leibniz we again find Spinoza’s extended and thinking substance; but here, it appears as the force of extension and perception, and is multiplied infinitely. We likewise meet his notion of mode and his determinism, but this is softened by the doctrine of substantiality of individuals. In spite of its absolute identity, the monad develops continually. Our author takes it “for granted that every being, and consequently the created monad also, is subject to change, and even that this change is continual in each.”⁴⁰ The soul, like the body, is in a state of change, tendency, and appetite. This perpetual change is called life. Each of these states composing it is the logical consequence of the preceding state and the source of the following state. “As every present state of a simple substance is naturally a consequence of its preceding state, so its present is big with the future.”⁴¹

Hence, freedom of indifference is out of the question in the human soul. In the system of Leibniz, each substance or monad is free in the same sense as Spinoza’s unitary substance; i.e., it is not determined by any power outside of itself. But though not determined from without, it is not on that account independent of its own nature, free in reference to itself. The determinism of Leibniz is to that of Spinoza what the determinism of St. Thomas is to the predestination of St. Augustine. It allows each spirit to be “as it were, a little divinity in its own department,” and so softens the element in fatalism which is objectionable to the moral sense, without, however, ceasing to apply the law of causality and the principle of sufficient reason to both the physical and moral realms. “I am very removed,” he says, “from accepting the views of Bradwardine, Wiclif, Hobbes, and Spinoza, but we must always bear witness to the truth,”⁴² and this truth is autonomous determinism: nothing determines the acts of the soul except the soul itself and its preceding acts.

If each monad is, “as it were, a little divinity in its own department,” if each is a little absolute, what is the highest Divinity, the real absolute? If we were to judge from what we now know of the theory of monads, we should reply: Leibniz substitutes for the monotheism of Descartes and the pantheism of Spinoza a kind of polytheism, for the monarchical conception of the universe, a kind of cosmical republic governed by the law of harmony. But, though that may be his secret thought, it is not his exoteric doctrine. The harmony which governs the universe is a harmony pre-established by God: it is not itself the absolute. The monads, which “are the true atoms of nature and the elements of things,”⁴³ are none the less created.⁴⁴ They are indestructible, but

a miracle can destroy them.⁴⁵ That is to say, they are neither absolutely primitive and eternal, nor, in a word, the absolute; but they depend on a divinity, “the primitive unity or the original simple substance, of which all monads, created or derived, are the products, and are born, so to speak, from moment to moment, by continual fulgurations of the Divinity.”⁴⁶ Hence, we have created monads on the one hand, and an uncreated monad, the Monad of monads, on the other; the former are finite and relative; the latter is infinite and absolute.

This Monad of monads is not, like Bruno’s, the universe itself considered as infinite; it is a real God, that is, a God distinct from the universe. Leibniz proves his existence by the principle of sufficient reason. “This sufficient reason for the existence of the universe cannot be found in the succession of contingent things, that is, of bodies and their representations in souls; because matter being indifferent in itself to motion and to rest, and to this or that motion, we cannot find the reason of motion in it, and still less of a particular motion. And although the present motion which is in matter comes from the preceding motion, and this, in turn, from one preceding it, we do not advance one step though we go ever so far; for the same question always remains. Thus, it is necessary that the sufficient reason, which has no further need of another reason, be outside of this series of contingent things, and be found in a substance which is their cause, or which is a necessary being, having the reason of its existence in itself, otherwise we should still have no sufficient reason at which to stop. And this ultimate reason of things is called God. This simple primitive substance must contain in itself eminently the perfections contained in the derivative substances which are its effects; hence it will have perfect power, knowledge, and will, that is, it will have omnipotence, omniscience, and supreme goodness.”

⁴⁷ Although Leibniz protests against anthropomorphism, he speaks of God as having “chosen the best possible plan in creating the universe. . . . and, above all, the laws of movement best adjusted and most conformable to abstract or metaphysical reasons.” . . . Such, for example, by virtue of which “the same quantity of total and absolute force is always preserved in it,” and that other law by virtue of which “action and reaction are always equal.”⁴⁸

The difficulty confronting the Leibnizian theology is the same as that which meets Descartes. The latter had to confess that the word “substance” when applied to God has not the same meaning as when applied to the creature, and, consequently, that the creature is not a substance in the true sense: a statement which occasioned the system of Spinoza. Leibniz’s theology, too, seems to be caught on the horns of a dilemma: Either God is a monad, and in that case finite beings are not monads in the strict sense of the term (which overthrows the monadology); or, created beings are monads, and then we cannot call God a monad unless we identify him with his creatures. But the pliant and cautious genius of a Leibniz turns to account even his defeats. Though the idea of God is confused and contradictory for our intelligence, it is not so in itself. The fact that we are confronted with insoluble difficulties in contemplating the absolute, simply proves that the human soul is not the Monad of monads, — that it occupies a distinguished but not the highest place in the scale of substances. Hence, it must follow from the very nature of things that we can have only a confused notion of the Supreme Being. Just as the plant has a confused perception of the animal, and the animal a confused perception of man, so, too, man has only an indistinct perception and a faint inkling of higher beings and the Supreme Being. In order to have an adequate notion of God, one would have to be God, and the fact that we have no such notion finds its natural explanation in the transcendency of the Supreme Being. God is supernatural or transcendent in relation to man, as man is a supernatural being with respect to animals, the animal a supernatural being with respect to plants, and so on. If we mean by reason the human understanding, God is also supra-rational in so far as he surpasses human nature (or is supernatural); that is, he transcends human intelligence as much as his perfection surpasses ours.

We see with what skill the philosopher of universal conciliation acquits himself of his task as a mediator between science and Christianity. Unlike the English philosophers, his contemporaries, who in true nominalistic fashion endeavor to separate religion and philosophy, he begins the work of St. Anselm and St. Thomas all over again on a different plan. His highest ambition is to form an alliance between philosophy and faith, and, if possible, between

Lutheranism and Catholicism. He adopts the motto of the Schoolmen: Absolute agreement between the dogmas of the Church and human reason.⁴⁹ He antagonizes those who distinguish between philosophical truth and religious truth, — a distinction which saved the freethinkers of the Renaissance from anathema, — and he finds fault with Descartes for having cleverly evaded the discussion of the mysteries of faith, as though one could hold a philosophy that is irreconcilable with religion, or as though a religion could be true that contradicts truths otherwise proved.⁵⁰

Behind his seeming orthodoxy, however, we may easily detect the traces of his rationalism. When he proclaims theism he does so in the name of philosophy; when he affirms the supernatural he does it in the name of reason, and, to a certain extent, by means of rationalism. He is so far removed from assuming the absolute transcendency of the divine being, as to hold that what transcends human reason cannot contradict reason. Like the ancient Schoolmen before him, he continues to remind us that whatever is above reason is not therefore against reason, that whatever is decidedly contradictory to reason cannot be true in religion. By virtue of the law of universal analogy, there must be an analogy, an agreement, a harmony, between divine reason and human reason; and a radical opposition between the Creator and the creature is not conceivable. Owing to this agreement, man naturally possesses faith in God and in the immortality of the soul, these two central doctrines of all religion; and revelation simply helps to bring out the truths which have been implanted in the human mind by the Creator. Christianity is evidently reduced to the narrow proportions of deism in the system of Leibniz, and revelation becomes a mere sanction of the principles of natural religion.

But, how could a thinker who held that souls have “no windows through which anything can enter or pass out” do otherwise than favor theological rationalism; how could he seriously declare that the soul is enlightened by a supernatural revelation? How could the man who laughed at Newton and the Cartesians for assuming that God interferes with the world, really assume a special intervention of God in history? If we believe in revelation, we must also assume that God has given or can give to the soul the means of communicating with the external world, or windows, to use Leibniz’s expression. Now, if God can give windows to the intelligent monad, then it is not contrary to its nature to have them, — then it can have them. This means that it can cease to be an absolutely spontaneous force or an absolute ruler in its domain; it means, in a word, that it ceases to be a monad. Leibniz must choose between two alternatives: he must either accept the theory of monads and pre-established harmony, which, according to his explicit declaration,⁵¹ excludes all special divine intervention, or abandon his system in favor of the faith of the Church.

The author of the Theodicy, like St. Thomas, subordinates the will of God to the divine reason and its eternal laws. This is a characteristic trait of Leibnizian rationalism, and contrary to the doctrines of Descartes and his teachers, the Scotists and the Jesuits, according to whom not only metaphysical and moral truths, but even mathematical axioms, depend on the divine will. “It must not be imagined,” he says,⁵² “as is sometimes done, that the eternal truths which are dependent on God are arbitrary and depend on his will, as Descartes and afterward M. Poiret⁵³ seem to have believed. . . . Nothing could be more unreasonable. . . . For if the establishment of justice (for example) happened arbitrarily and without reason, if God hit upon it haphazard, as we draw lots, then his goodness and wisdom are not revealed in it, and it does not bind him. And if he established or made what we call justice and goodness by a purely arbitrary decree and without reason, he can unmake them and change their nature, so that we have no reason to suppose that he will observe them always. . . . It is no more contrary to reason and piety to say (with Spinoza) that God acts without knowledge, than to claim that his knowledge does not find the eternal rules of goodness and of justice among its objects; or finally, that he has a will which has no regard for these rules.”⁵⁴

Hence, the God of Leibniz is not like an Oriental monarch; he is a sovereign bound by laws which he cannot unmake, a kind of constitutional king and chief executive of the universe, rather than the all-powerful autocrat of Tertullian and Duns Scotus. He resembles the God of Montesquieu, who “has his laws,” rather than the God of the indeterministic theologians.

The supreme power is not the will of God taken by itself, but his will governed by the eternal laws of his intelligence, laws which determine his conduct without constraining him, since they constitute the very essence of his nature. Instead of the nature of God, Spinoza simply said nature. According to Leibniz, the Supreme Being is nature manifesting itself through the medium of a personal will; according to Spinoza, he is nature acting without such a medium; or, if we choose, an unconscious will. Hence, both thinkers are determinists, however violently Leibniz may protest against the teachings of the Jew of Amsterdam.

In creating things, God was determined by his infinite reason, and necessarily created the best possible world. Evil exists only in the details, and serves to enhance the glory of the good: the whole is supremely perfect. The Theodicy deals with the question of physical, metaphysical, and moral evil, and aims to refute those who regard the existence of evil as an argument against Providence. It is a popular rather than a scientific book. It is surprising with what familiarity the author speaks of God, just as though God had initiated him into the innermost secrets of his nature. How can Leibniz, who has such certain knowledge that God is not the free author of the natural and moral laws, that his will depends on his intelligence, that he necessarily created the best possible world, maintain that God is supra-rational? What a strange procedure! First he relegates the Being of Beings to the domain of mystery, like so many theologians, and then he defines him, describes him, and makes out a complete inventory of his attributes, as though he were describing a plant or a mineral. For this reason as well as on account of his attitude towards empiricism, Leibniz, whose monadology is so great, so original, and so modern, still belongs to the tribe of the Schoolmen.

But the time had now come for subjecting ontology to the critical sifting-process. The controversy between Leibniz and the Englishman Locke concerning the origin of ideas formed the prelude to an important epoch in the history of modern philosophy.

In view of his principle "that the monad has no windows," Leibniz cannot grant that our knowledge has any other source than the soul itself. Nothing can enter it; hence, strictly speaking, the direct observation of external facts or experience is impossible. Experience through the medium of the senses is an illusion; it is, in reality, nothing but confused thought. He repeatedly declares that the soul, and the soul alone, is both the subject and the object of sensation. We never perceive and experience anything but ourselves. Everything in the mind is spontaneous production, thought, or speculation. Whether we shall regard our thought as the result of an impression from without, or as the product of the mind itself, will depend on its degree of clearness or confusion. Thought, however, though autonomous, is not arbitrary and free from law. It obeys the sovereign laws of contradiction and sufficient reason. But it does not depend on anything external to the thinking monad, around which the principium distinctionis rises like an impassable wall. Leibniz also declares, in answer to Locke's denial of innate ideas, ⁵⁵ that nothing is inborn in the understanding except the understanding itself, and, consequently, the germ of all our ideas. ⁵⁶

The difference between Leibniz and Locke seems very slight: Locke by no means denies the innate power of the mind to form ideas, while Leibniz grants that ideas do not pre-exist in the mind actually; they exist in it virtually, as the veins in a block of marble might mark the outlines of a statue to be made from it. Now, then, either the expression, virtual or potential existence of ideas in the mind, has no meaning, or it is synonymous with power (*potentia*, *virtus*), or mental faculty of forming ideas, a faculty which Locke is perfectly willing to admit. But this seemingly insignificant controversy really represented the opposition between the Middle Ages and modern philosophy, between the speculative method, which passes from conceptions to facts, and the positive method, which passes from facts to conceptions. Locke does not merely combat the idealistic principle; what he especially antagonizes is the idealistic prejudice that a priori reasoning relieves the philosopher of the duty of directly observing facts. By declaring himself against the author of the *Essay concerning Human Understanding*, Leibniz, who was otherwise more profound and more speculative than his opponent, sided with the School, that is, with the past against the future.

All that was necessary was to present his doctrines in scholastic form. This the mathematician

Christian Wolff⁵⁷ proceeded to do. The Leibnizian system contained a precious gem: the conception of active force which had superseded the dualism of thought and extension, and this treasure was lost in the labored attempts of the professor of Halle to remodel the system. This clear and systematic but narrow-minded thinker revived the extended and thinking substances of Cartesianism, without even suspecting that he was thereby destroying the central and really fruitful notion of the Monadology. Thus altered and divided into rational ontology, psychology, cosmology, and theology, the Leibniz-Wolffian metaphysics dominated the German schools until the advent of Kantianism.⁵⁸

NOTES

1. His writings, most of which are brief, have been collected and edited by Raspe (Amsterdam and Leipsic, 1765); Louis Dutens (Geneva, 1768); J. E. Erdmann, Berlin, 1840; Foucher de Careil (*Euvres de Leibniz*, published for the first time after the original manuscripts, Paris, 1859 ff.); Paul Janet (2 vols., Paris, 1866, with the correspondence of Leibniz and Arnauld); [C. J. Gerhardt, *Philosophical writings of Leibniz*, 7 vols., Berlin, 1875-90. German writings ed. by G. E. Guhrauer, Berlin, 1838-40. Engl. translation of important philosophical writings by G. M. Duncan, New Haven, 1890; of the *New Essays*, by A. G. Langley, London and New York, 1893]. [G. E. Guhrauer, *G. W. Freih. v. Leibniz*, 2 vols., Breslau, 1842, 1846; Engl. by Mackie, Boston, 1845; Ludwig Feuerbach, *Darstellung, Entwicklung und Kritik der leibnizschen Philosophie*, Ansbach, 1837; 2d ed., 1844]; Nourrisson, *La philosophie de Leibniz*, Paris, 1860; [J. T. Merz, *Leibniz* (in *Blackwood's Philosophical Classics*), London, 1884; J. Dewey, *Leibniz's New Essays concerning the Human Understanding* (*Griggs's Philosophical Classics*), Chicago, 1888; E. Dillmann, *Eine neue Darstellung der leibnizschen Monadenlehre*, Leipsic, 1891.] For the Leibnizian doctrine of matter and monads see Hartenstein, *Commentatio de materie apud Leibnizium notione*, Leipsic, 1846; for his theodicy, J. Bonifas, *Etude sur la Theodicee de Leibniz*, Paris, 1863; for his doctrine of pre-established harmony, Hugo Sommer, *De doctrina quam de harm. praest. L. proposuit*, Gottingen, 1864; etc., etc. [Cf. also: Foucher de Careil, *Leibniz, Descartes et Spinoza*, Paris, 1863; E. Pfeleiderer, *Leibniz und Geulincx*, Tubingen, 1884; L. Stein, *Leibniz und Spinoza*, Berlin, 1890; G. Hartenstein, *Locke's Lehre von der menschlichen Erkenntniss in Vergleichung mit Leibniz's Kritik derselben*, Leipsic, 1864; Frank Thilly, *Leibnizens Streit gegen Locke in Ansehung der angeborenen Ideen*, Heidelberg, 1891; and especially K. Fischer's *History of Philosophy*. - TR.]

2. [According to L. Stein (*Leibniz und Spinoza*), from F. Mercurius van Helmont. - TR.]

3. *Nouveaux Essais*, Preface.

4. *Monadologie*, § 14.

5. *Nouveaux Essai*, Book II., ch. IX. and XIX.; *Principes de la nature et de la grace*, § 4.

6. *Lettre sur la question de savoir si l'essence du corps consiste dans l'etendue* (ed. Erdmann, p. 113).

7. *Lettre sur la question de savoir si l'essence du corps consiste dans l'etendue* (ed. Erdmann, p. 113).

8. *Examen des principes de Malebranche* (Erdmann, p. 692).

9. *Eclaircissement du nouveau systeme de la communication des substances*, p. 132.

10. *De ipsa natura, sive de vi insita actionibusque creaturarum*, § 8. Cf. *Lettre II. à M. Bourguet*.

11. *Nouveau systeme de la nature*, § 11.

12. *Monadologie*, § 7.

13. *Nouveau systeme de la nature*, § 16. [I have in many instances used Duncan's translations, making such changes as I deemed proper. - Tr.]

14. *Monadologie*, §§ 19, 66, 82.

15. *Réplique aux réflexions de Bayle*, p. 186.

16. *Ad Des Bosses Epist. III. : Necessè est omnes entelechias sive monades perceptione*

preditas esse.

17. *Lettre à M. des Maizeaux.*

18. *Réplique aux réflexions de Bayle*, p. 184; *Monadologie*, §§ 56-62; *Principes de la nature et de la grace*, § 3.

19. *Monadologie*, § 70.

20. *Lettre à M. Dangicourt*, p. 746.

21. *Extrait d'une lettre à M. Dangicourt*, p. 746; *Monadologie*, § 70.

22. *Monadologie*, §51.

23. *Ad Des Bosses Epist. XXX.: Substantia agit quantum potest, nisi impediatur: impeditur autem etiam substantia simplex, sed naturaliter non nisi intus a se ipsa.*

24. *Second éclaircissement du système de la communication des substances*, pp. 133-134.

25. *Lettre à Clarke*, p. 746.

26. *Monadologie*, § 81.

27. We say *perhaps*; for the objection may be urged against Leibniz that the perpetual miracle of the Cartesians is not a miracle in the sense that the natural course of things is violently interrupted, and that it is not a miracle precisely because it is perpetual. From this point of view, pre-established harmony, a miracle performed once for all, at the beginning of things, is a conception philosophically inferior to the Cartesian hypothesis.

28. *Théodicée*, § 348.

29. *Lettre IV. à M. Bourguet.*

30. *Nouveaux essais*, Preface.

31. Erdmann's edition, p. 676.

32. The biographer of Bayle and editor of his *Dictionnaire historique et critique.*

33. *Monadologie*, § 24.

34. This expression can only be used in a figurative sense by Leibniz for there is no actual relation between body and soul.

35. *Principes de la nature et de la grace*, § 6.

36. *Monadologie*, § 72.

37. *Id.*, §§ 73, 77.

38. *Nouveau système de la nature*, § 16.

39. *Ad Wagnerum*, p. 467: *Qui brutis animas, aliisque materie partibus omnem perceptionem organismum negant, illi divinam majestatem non satis agnoscunt, introducentes aliquid indignum Deo et incultum, nempe vacuum metaphysicum . . . Qui vero animas veras perceptionemque dant brutis, et tamen animas eorum naturaliter perire posse statuunt, etiam demonstrationem nobis tollunt, per quam ostenditur mentes nostras naturaliter perire non posse.*

40. *Monadologie*, § 10.

41. *Id.*, § 22.

42. *Théodicée*, II.

43. *Monadologie*, § 3.

44. *Id.*, § 47.

45. *Id.*, § 6.

46. *Id.*, § 47.

47. *Principes de la nature et de la grâce*, §§ 8, 9.

48. *Id.*, §§ 10, 11. Cf. *Théodicée*, III., § 345.

49. Nothing better characterizes the essentially scholastic tendency of Leibniz than the following title of one of his last compositions: *The Principles of Nature and of Grace, Founded on Reason* (1714), and this other title; *Discourse on the Conformity of Faith with Reason* (Introduction to the *Theodicy*).

50. *De vero methodo philosophiæ et theologiæ*, p. 111.

51. *Principes de la nature et de la grâce*, § 13.

52. *Monadologie*, § 46

53. A pastor at Hamburg, a native of Metz (1646-1719). Against the theory of innate ideas of his sometime teacher Descartes, and Locke's theory of acquired ideas, he sets up his mystical

theory of *infused* ideas, that is, ideas communicated by an inspiration from on high (*Economie divine*, 7 vols., Amsterdam, 1687; etc.).

54. *Théodicée*, II., 176-177

55. *Essay concerning Human Understanding*, ch. I.

56. *Nouveaux essais*, Preface : *Nous sommes innés à nous mêmes pour ainsi dire*; *id.*, II., 1: *Nihil est in intellectu quod non fuerit in sensu, nisi ipse intellectus*.

57. 1679-1754. Professor at the University of Halle, from which the influence of the Pietists succeeded in removing him. He was recalled by Frederick II. Latin works: *Oratio de Sinarum philosophia*, Halle, 1726; *Philosophia rationalis sive logica methodo scientifica pertractata*, Frankfurt and Leipsic, 1728; *Philosophia prima s. ontologia*, *id.*, 1730, *Cosmologia generalis*, *id.*, 1731; *Psychologia empirica*, *id.*, 1732; *Psychologia rationalis*, *id.*, 1734; *Theologia naturalis*, 1736-37; *Jus naturæ*, 1740; *Philosophia moralis sive ethica*, Halle, 1750; *Philosophia civilis sive politica*, *id.*, 1746; *Jus gentium*, 1750; and a large number of treatises in the German language. [See, on Wolff and his school, Zeller, *Die deutsche Philosophie seit Leibniz*, 2d ed., Munich, 1875, pp. 172 ff.]

58. The principal disciples of the Leibniz-Wolffian school are: Ludovici (*Ausführlicher Entwurf einer vollständigen Historie der wolffischen Philosophie*, 3 vols., Leipsic, 1736-38); Bilfinger (1693-1750), author of numerous and lucid commentaries on the philosophy of Leibniz and Wolff; Thümming (*Institutiones philosophiæ Wolffianæ etc.*); Baumgarten (1714-1762), who, in his *Æsthetica* (2 vols., 1750-58), adds the theory of the beautiful in art, or *æsthetics*, to the philosophical sciences, etc. Kant himself was a disciple of Wolff before he became his adversary, and the numerous representatives of the German Aufklärung, which preceded the appearance of the *Critiques*, were related to Wolff (Reimarus, Moses Mendelssohn, Lessing, Nicolai, etc.). [See R. Sommer, *Grundzüge einer Geschichte der deutschen Psychologie und Ästhetik, etc.*, Würzburg, 1892, and Dessoir's work, *supra*, p. 15.]

Alfred Weber. *History of Philosophy*. Trans. Frank Thilly. New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1908.

© SophiaOmni, 2005. The specific electronic form of this text is copyright. Permission is granted to print out copies for educational purposes and for personal use only. No permission is granted for commercial use.