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Active or passive?

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LEIBNIZ'S METAPHYSICS. Its origins and development. By Christia Mercer. 530pp.

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Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz (1646-1716) is widely regarded as the great rationalist of the seventeenth century, a man who allowed reason to dictate the shape of his grand metaphysical system and posited a reality consisting of a plenitude of "monads", unextended mind-like substances. Here was a philosopher who was willing to let the deliverances of the intellect lead him as they may, no matter how odd or bizarre the resulting system might seem. He is frequently contrasted with his scholastic predecessors. Unlike them, he did not allow the fine points of Christian doctrine to dictate the shape of his metaphysics (even though he was a Christian himself). Unlike them, he had the new mechanistic science (to which he was a contributor) available to him, and could frame a metaphysics palatable to the modern age.

When we attempt to come to grips with Leibniz's metaphysical system, there is no single great work to turn to. Rather, we have a plentiful scattering of articles and correspondence. Why no systematic work from the great rationalist system-builder? Many of us have been content with Bertrand Russell's explanation:

The reasons why Leibniz did not embody his system in one great work are not to be found in the nature of that system. On the contrary, it would have lent itself far better than Spinoza's philosophy to geometrical definitions and axioms. It is in the character and circumstances of the man, not of his theories, that the explanation of his way of writing is to be found.

For everything that he wrote he seems to have required some immediate stimulus, some near and pressing incentive. To please a prince, to refute a rival philosopher, or to escape the censures of a theologian, he would take any pains.

In piecing together the details of his system, students of Leibniz invariably concentrate on his "mature" works, beginning with his Discourse in Metaphysics of 1686 and First Truths of 1689-90, with the justification that Leibniz's earlier works date from an era when he had failed to outgrow his medieval predecessors and are thus relatively unimportant. (There is also the matter of convenience -the early work is, in good part, not readily available.) But Christia Mercer's ground-breaking book tries to shake us out of the conviction that Leibniz is a modern thinker. She offers us by far the most comprehensive overview of Leibniz's early work available today, and argues, on the basis of an

impressive array of textual evidence garnered from considerable archival work, that most of Leibniz's "mature" metaphysics had already been worked out by the time that he went to Paris in 1672. Moreover, those theses turn out to be, in large part, elaborations of Aristotelian and Platonic theses that Leibniz was concerned largely to build upon, not to argue for.

According to Mercer, Leibniz was "not a rationalist who believed that one arrives at fundamental truths through armchair intuition and then deduces from them other truths". Rather, he was someone who looked to the "underlying truths" of the "great philosophical systems" that pre-dated him, seeking to mould them in order to put them in harmony both with each other and with Christian doctrine. Of his commitment to the basic claims of Aristotelian metaphysics, Mercer contends, shockingly, that Leibniz presents "neither explanation nor argumentation for these claims" and that they instead "come part and parcel with his commitment to Aristotle". Moreover, as she presents him, there were deep philosophical underpinnings to his refusal to present his views in terms of a structured deductive system. For one thing, that would not have been true to the shape of his own eclectic style of thought. Furthermore, his conciliatory ideals inclined him anyway against certain "rationalist" modes of presentation.

The "unmodern" character of Mercer's Leibniz bears emphasis. The project of medieval philosophy was, to a first approximation, a project of elaborating the insights of Plato and (especially) Aristotle into a family of views that could sit with and even shed light on the details of Christian doctrine.

Leibniz, as Mercer presents him, is a strikingly medieval thinker, one who self-consciously sculpted the insights of the Ancients to fit various Christian doctrines (including those concerning the Eucharist and the Resurrection). I will focus on the Aristotelian narrative that Mercer supplies, but the Platonic themes in Leibniz, as Mercer unravels them, are also fascinating and widespread. They involve, inter alia, a vision of the world as reflecting the harmony and structure of God's mind, and a conception of the relation between God and the world built on the quasi-mystical Neoplatonic idea of "emanation" (wherein the Supreme Being is grasped on the model of a fountain that "overflows" to yield a multitude of beings, without this inducing any depletion in the fountain).

Aristotle thought that the world around us was built up out of "substances", objects in the fullest sense. A flock of sheep is a thing in some sense, but we understand well enough the suggestion that a flock of sheep is not a bona fide entity, not a thing that God would put on the list of the elements of being. A human being, by contrast, does intuitively count as a bona fide entity. And indeed Aristotle was perfectly willing to count a human being among the substances that make up the world.

Now on Aristotle's view, any substance that we find in the natural world has two aspects: its form and its matter. Crudely put, the matter is the stuff that stands in need of organization, while the form is an organizing principle that gives structure to the matter. The form is active, the matter passive. Mercer's Leibniz takes all this and more on board

from his Aristotelian heritage. Of particular importance is that he takes the Aristotelian position to require that any feature that belongs to a substance be a feature that flows from and is thus explained by its nature -that is, its form.

Those so-called features of a thing that do not flow from its nature, being merely supplied from the outside as it were, are not on this conception truly features that belong to that thing at all.

This model of reality would seem to be undone by the new mechanistic science.

The Aristotelian tradition seeks to explain a thing's profile in terms of its nature, its substantial form. The mechanistic science of Leibniz's day, by contrast, seeks to explain the natural world in terms of the motions of tiny particles which arrange to form this or that shaped complex, and which move and collide, all in accord with some basic principles of motion. On the face of it, then, explanation by substantial form gets supplanted by explanation in terms of extended matter and the laws of motion: there are no substantial forms internal to each thing that act as invisible hands that generate its unity and motion.

But Leibniz did not see things this way, as Mercer makes vivid. He did undergo a conversion to mechanistic science early in his life, holding that the motions we observe in the world around us are indeed suitably predicted and systematized by mechanistic laws of motion. But Aristotelian metaphysics was indispensable to his search for a deeper explanation of things.

Why did he take this view? On his account, mechanistic science could not, ultimately, provide an adequate explanation of some features of the natural world that stand in need of explanation. As he saw it, mechanistic science had a certain stock to work with: shape, motion, magnitude and so on. But that stock was inadequate to certain purposes. How, for example, could the cohesion among bits of matter be explained in terms of such a stock? As Leibniz put it, why doesn't the wind just blow our heads off? What is the metaphysical glue that fastens matter together?

Equally problematic was the fact that on the mechanistic model, matter would seem to be something that can inherit motion but, in contrast to mind-like agents, could not be the originating source of that motion. So, by Leibniz's lights, there was a difficulty in explaining where motion came from in the first place. More generally still, there seemed to be no explanation of the origin of force, of the dynamical quality in nature. The mechanists present us with the geometry of shape and arrangement. But these cannot be the features from which forces flow. Matter is passive shape. Force is active. Where do forces come from?

As the story unfolds, we learn that Leibniz's first pass at dealing with these problems was to posit God as the sole locus of genuine activity. God takes matter and breathes life into it, as it were. All the activity, force, cohesion and so on that we see in the world simply bears witness to God's use of matter as an instrument for his activity. But Leibniz quickly

became dissatisfied by this. If material beings have no inner nature from which forces flow, then (by the Aristotelian principles just outlined) those forces could not truly belong to material beings and, indeed, God would be the only substance in reality.

Thus Leibniz came to see the need to posit beings in the natural world from which force and motion could flow. Matter was passive and could not in itself be the originating source of these features. Thus he came -around 1669 -to believe that the world was populated with immaterial mind-like substances that permeated the natural world and accounted for the ubiquity of force, cohesion and motion.

By 1671, his position had become more radical. Though he retained the belief that natural beings had both a passive and an active aspect, he became suspicious of the reality of matter. On the one hand, he was convinced that everything in the world must add to its goodness; on the other hand he was suspicious of the idea that blind, passive matter could add anything to the goodness of being. Moreover, he began to feel pressure towards denying the reality of causation between substances, on account of the need to reckon the features of a substance as flowing from what was within it.

The passive aspect of substance is accordingly transformed in his system. The old combination of matter with mind-like substantial form is replaced by a new combination of "dominant" substantial form with a colony of subservient mind-like substances.

Further, each subservient mind-like substance has in turn a similar structure.

It is as if each substance is a solar system consisting of a sun and various planets that themselves turn out under scrutiny to be solar systems; and so on to infinity. The dominant substantial form does not exactly causally interact with subsidiary forms. On the contrary, each form unfolds in accordance with its own inner instructions. The relationship between each dominant mind and lesser minds replays the relationship between God and world: the world "emanates" from God even though its activities come from within.

Here, then, we have arrived at a vision of the world that is, roughly, the mature metaphysics that Leibniz is known for.

But what is striking is that this has all occurred by 1672. It thus appears that, by that time, the architecture of Leibniz's system is firmly in place.

Moreover, Mercer's advance is not merely one of chronology. As with many systems of ideas, we learn a great deal about Leibniz's by tracing its course of evolution.

Impressive though it is, this book will, for some, be disappointing. Leibniz's work is one episode in a continuing intellectual struggle in the history of Western -and indeed human -thought between our conflicting tendencies to give either mind or matter the upper hand when it comes to ultimate reality.

Mercer's account of Leibniz allows us to see much better how and why Leibniz came to give mind the upper hand. But her goals are firmly those of the philosophically able historian wishing to understand a thinker of the past rather than those of the inquiring philosopher who is trying to figure out how the world really is. Thus Mercer deliberately avoids evaluating arguments and avoids trying to figure out what is right and important or wrong and instructive about what Leibniz is doing.

Is Leibniz right that mechanistic philosophy has a real problem with accounting for the dynamic in nature? Is Leibniz right that nature is built up out of individual substances that have a real essence that explains their basic profile? Is Leibniz right that there is a fundamental explanatory advantage to a world-view that puts mind first? Such questions are left altogether for the reader to resolve. A work should not be faulted for what it does not set out to do. But those who wish to bring Leibniz's argumentation and ideas to life in a way suitable for evaluation are left with plenty of work to do.

What of Mercer's repudiation of Leibniz as a rationalist? To my mind, her contentions are somewhat overstated. She announces early on that Russell and Couturat were confused in supposing that Leibniz's conception of logic was foundational to his thought. But rather than show how his logico-mathematical thought fits into his overall system of ideas, Mercer omits discussion of it altogether. In general, the technical aspects of Leibniz's thought, including his efforts at arithmetizing truth and his thinking on infinity and the continuum, are kept out of view, leaving one with a suspicion that the vision of Leibniz that is being presented is one-sided.

There are, moreover, some very obvious facts that militate in favour of the orthodox view of Leibniz as a rationalist. He believed, after all, that the human mind could demonstrate the existence of God by a priori reflection. And while he did, as Mercer contends, obtain many of his considered views by inheritance and not intuition, he did seemingly believe that, at least in God's mind, truths were organized into a logical system, a system into which we humans can get a real, albeit faltering, glimpse.

Whatever one's quibbles, the merits of this book are very striking. This is without doubt one of the most important contributions to Leibniz scholarship in decades. Anyone interested in Leibniz's metaphysics will come away from this book understanding his early and mature thought far better than they did beforehand. Leibniz's Metaphysics is immensely learned and helpfully structured, especially in its willingness to lay out the bare bones of Leibniz's thinking in terms of a set of clearly articulated principles and to use helpful analogy and metaphor as a way into his intellectual world. Whether or not we wish to go on to appraise Leibniz's views, those of a philosophical bent ought certainly to marvel at this seventeenth-century system builder who, perhaps naively, really believed that "the true philosophy could effect individual, religious and political peace".

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