Leibniz on the Trinity and the Incarnation: Reason and Revelation in the Seventeenth Century

Maria Rosa Antognazza

Leibniz: A Guide for the Perplexed

Franklin Perkins


Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz (1646–1716) isn’t read as much as he should be. Few philosophers love his subtle metaphysical ideas. Theologians seldom comment on his natural or revealed theology. These books are a good way to begin correcting this neglect and discovering his value.

Maria Rosa Antognazza professes philosophy at London’s King’s College. Franklin Perkins is an assistant professor of philosophy at Chicago’s DePaul University. Both books have all the virtues a book should have. They are clearly written, as well as full of fresh ideas and helpful references to further reading.

Antognazza follows a chronological structure: the early writings (1663-1671); fragments of a system (1672-1692); English Trinitarian polemics (1693-1705); and the last years (1706-1716). She shows that Leibniz never stopped working on issues in revealed theology. She also underlines the continuity of his theological interests. Although he was a Lutheran, he tried to understand Catholicism. And he defended orthodox interpretations of the Trinity and the Incarnation against Continental and English heresies.

Each section of Antognazza’s book contains fascinating ideas. From the writings between 1663 and 1671, there is the challenging view that moral certainty is the maximum degree of certainty that can be attained, both in the mysteries of Faith and in the facts of Science. From the system he began to create between 1672 and 1692, there are helpful insights on the harmony of faith and reason, as well as on the authority of Tradition as a guide to the interpretation of Scripture. During this period, Leibniz’s reflections on the Trinity and the Incarnation prepared the way for his engagements with English Trinitarian heretics like Ralph Cudworth, Stephen Nye, and John Wallis between 1693 and 1705. In these exchanges, Leibnitz put his finger on a neglected dimension of Trinitarian controversies: to what extent is the issue epistemological rather than metaphysical? Is it a clash between pro-Trinitarian rationalism and anti-Trinitarian empiricism? In his last ten years, from 1706 to 1716, Leibniz returned to major themes of his early writings: his criticism of Socinian doctrines, and his defence of the harmony of faith and reason. He also consolidated his perfect being theodicy, which doesn’t get the attention it deserves.

After an introduction on how to read Leibniz, Perkins goes, in turn, to his theodicy, his concept of substance, and his concept of a rational mind. Moving backwards, in chapter
four, Perkins surveys what Leibniz teaches us about the limitations of empiricism as a theory of knowledge. In chapter three, he introduces us to the metaphysics Leibniz attached to the fact that each of us is unique and has a unique experience of reality. He calls us monads and argues that each of us "is like a complete world and like a mirror of God or of the whole universe, which each one expresses in its own way, somewhat as the same city is variously represented depending upon the different positions from which it is viewed" (page 83). This puts a new spin on subjectivism and relativism. For sure, there is no privileged view of anything; but he sees our uniqueness as evidence of our finitude and incompleteness, and therefore of our need to put what we see alongside what others see, so as to get a more complete view of things.

In chapter two, Perkins engages with Leibniz’s theodicy, which rests on two moral certainties. A world without evil and suffering would have no need for virtues such as courage and compassion. And, at any given moment, the best possible world is the one that God gives us: a world in which there is a perfect balance of good and evil. Perkins moves to this point by surveying Leibniz on knowledge, on the existence of God, and on the nature of evil. Most of the time his steps are graceful and secure. But he doesn't put sufficient emphasis on the strength and the weakness of Leibniz’s theodicy.

Its weakness is his belief that at every given moment the balance of good and evil in the world is improving. Given that everything God does is perfect, it’s not clear what this means. Its strength is that it isn’t rooted in the idea of "the best possible world". Instead, it’s rooted in the idea that God is perfect. And so, everything he does is perfect. And so, those who question the balance of good and evil in the world are suggesting that they are better at managing it than God is; which is absurd. This is a purely rational theodicy; but it withstood the unexpected death of Queen Sophie Charlotte in 1705. She was only 39, and a close friend with whom Leibniz corresponded regularly. He was shattered; but he continued to believe that he lived in a world in which, even at the moment of Sophie's death, God maintained a perfect balance of good and evil.

The good stuff that Perkins gives us completely outweighs the two moments when he stumbles slightly. And Antognazza opens doors to rooms full of neglected theological insights. It’s a pleasure to recommend both books. They are full of ideas for theological and philosophical reflection.

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