

Email to Donna Morabito of RRR's "Grapevine" monthly on-air book club

RE: Leibniz vs Voltaire

From: **David Rathbone**

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To: donnam@rrr.org.au

Hi Donna,

Me again at long last, finally making time to make good on those promised thoughts about Leibniz and the Candide podcast - the podcast's such a great idea by the way, very helpful, and makes it all so much less ephemeral and transient, and as I can't always be by a radio on Monday, its much appreciated by me for one. So in the interest of encouraging philosophy on RRR and on the basis of your kind responses to my various emails, here's a bit of relevant background re what's going on in the Leibniz vs. Voltaire debate. Got a cuppa? This might take a while!

Apart from maybe Goethe, Leibniz is really the last contender for the mantle of a "renaissance man", by which I mean he was the last person who actually able to know everything there was to be known at that time in every field of knowledge - he fully understood every branch of science of the day, and made major contributions to many of the sciences himself; he was one of the world's leading mathematicians at the time; he was fluent in half a dozen languages and competent in half a dozen more; he wrote fiction and dialogues, and read fiction voraciously. He is a major figure in the history of mathematics, and he and Isaac Newton independently and simultaneously invented differential calculus (this later led to a priority fight between them).

The son of a Prussian academic, he did the equivalent of a PhD in law by age 22, but then turned down an academic post and instead convinced George of Hannover to become his patron for a scheme of his to get the countries of Europe to stop fighting each other and unite. His idea was to establish a "League of Nations" in Paris, and he went there with George's support when he was only 24, and spent a year waiting to get to see the emperor. But there was nothing but endless postponements of the meeting, so he went to England and visited contacts who were establishing what they called the "Royal Society" - Robert Hooke and Isaac Newton and a few others. Leibniz impressed them all and was recognized as among Europe's leading scientists.

Then he went back to Hanover, where things gradually got more and more strained with George of H. See George wasn't exactly the brightest puppy in the litter, and all he knew was that the whole crazy "League of Nations" thing had been a flop and apparently just a way for young Gottfried to spend a few years in Paris and London and kind of embarrassing for him. And here's George, unable even to speak English or French let alone Latin and Greek, and Leibniz just knows it all doesn't he?. So when George inherits the English throne in 1714, he up and leaves for England and becomes George I of England (unable to speak English), with his entire court in tow - dozens of people - everyone except Leibniz, who then spent two years working on Mandarin before he died, a bit on the broken hearted side, and only two people came to his funeral: his trusty servant, and the priest who buried him.

But apart from inventing calculus and topology (which makes calculus look easy) and being involved in the development of both the microscope and the telescope, he is also a major figure in the birth of biology as a science, and an important precursor to Lamarck and Darwin and Mendel. He was also a significant astronomer, being the first person to explain the origin of the solar system out of a swirling gaseous cloud that developed spinning lumpy blobs that evolved into planets, and explained galaxies the same way. He was among the first who suggested that there must be other planets around other stars that may well have life one them. But to his philosophy.

As you said, Voltaire's book is a parody of Leibniz's philosophy, an attempt to reduce his system to absurdity by creating a character who lives by that philosophy (albeit unconsciously and by instinct alone), and showing how ridiculous such a character would be. Leibniz's philosophy is difficult to force into a nutshell, because he wasn't an academic, but mostly a diplomat, librarian and historian in the court of George of Hanover, and his philosophy isn't conveniently summarized anywhere in his voluminous writings. He was a prolific writer of unpublished works, and also a highly respected and esteemed correspondent, and in his thousands of letters he explains his philosophy better than in his books. Anyway, he only published two books in his lifetime - the Theodicy - a word he invented = Theos (god) + Dike (greek goddess of justice - often represented blindfolded with scales) - i.e. God on trial on the charge of creating suffering and evil; and the Monadology - his book of metaphysics explaining what he thinks reality is, namely "monads" of substance.

The key to Leibniz's way of thinking is this one thought: substance does not appear. Matter is not substance, but only the appearance of substance. He says "substance is spirit", be we think this thought today when we think a thought like "energy is what's real, and the things of our experience like light, heat and even matter itself is really just the various ways in which energy appears to us." This is the idea of his that most interested Einstein, for Leibniz says that not only is matter really just a manifestation of energy, but that time and space themselves are also just the appearances of energy, and not realities in and of themselves. Or as Einstein rephrased it, time and space are relative. They are just the way energy appears to us, and not what energy actually is.

What energy actually is, Leibniz says, is two things: sensation and appetite. And here's where we need to switch back from our 21st century word "energy" to Leibniz's 17th century word "spirit". Spirit, unlike "energy", is necessarily kind of personal, and unless you're a crystal carrying new-ager most people don't think of energy as personal, but just some kind of impersonal force. But Leibniz is very minimal in his metaphysics - spirit is just sensation plus appetite - the ability to sense, and the experience of appetite.

Spirit (aka sensing appetite) says Leibniz comes in "atoms" called monads. Actually, a mind is not a monad, but a "molecule" of monads, each with its own perspective. Think of it this way - each organ of your body has its own kind of sensations, and its own kind of appetite - your stomach's version of sensation ranges from "empty" to "full", and its version of appetite is obviously hunger. Likewise your lungs have a version of sensation - the good feeling of fresh mountain air versus the bad feeling of breathing pollution - and a version of appetite which we don't have a single word for, but is obviously the desire for oxygen, roughly speaking, which we feel as the "fresh air" of which we all like a breath. Likewise the liver, the skin, the brain and so on - they all have their own version of sensation and their own version of appetite - and we as a whole are the dynamic balance of synchronizing the appetites and the sensations of each monad. This is always a trade-off, and even a struggle to some extent. For example, you're on the way to the loo because you need to take a leak, but then you see a cream-cake you want to eat and think I don't need to pee all that badly, and the cake might be gone when I get back, so I'll hang on for a bit and scoff the cake down before I go to the loo. The various appetites and sensations (in this case, bladder vs. stomach) are balanced and ranked according to their relative strengths, and the actions of the whole body organized accordingly.

This is the core of Leibniz's defense of God in the Theodicy, where he kind of acts as God's defense lawyer against the atheist's case for execution on the grounds of having created evil. Leibniz says God has made the best world POSSIBLE. Of course we in our ignorance think life would be better if all of our appetites were satisfied all of the time, and there was no inner (or outer) conflict in our experience.

But Leibniz says this is like a bird dreaming that flying would be so much better if it wasn't for the air holding it back when ever it flew. Actually, without the air, the bird cannot fly nor even survive. Likewise he says a wheel would dream that it could go so much faster if it wasn't for friction, without realizing that without any friction (like on ice) it would just spin around and never be able to go anywhere. Likewise both inside and outside our bodies (which aren't really as different as we think, because space and time are imaginary, not real) we think it would be better with no pain ever, but actually, it would be much worse (one can't help thinking of today's obesity epidemic, or the false paradise of the heroin addict who kind of prove his point). Actually he says that belief in God really comes down to this: that the world is as good as it can be.

So what's God for Leibniz? God is the totality of all monads. Or in other words, each monad is God from one limited perspective - whether we call this "life", "energy", "substance" or "spirit", each monad is a little bit of it. But it's not a part like one brick is part of a house, but rather like one cell is a part of your body. Actually, the whole of your body is encoded in each and every cell - the science of genetics has confirmed Leibniz's philosophy here with the discovery of DNA. Each cell is the whole expressed in one particular way; likewise, each monad is God expressed in one particular way. This explains another of Leibniz's catch-phrases: "monads have no windows". They don't experience one another: rather, the entire universe is enfolded in each and every monad, and their "interactions" are in fact a pre-established harmony between them. In other words, all interaction is actually a co-incidence, a mutually harmonious projection in which the monads act as if they influence one another, but this is an illusion generated by all monads being projections of the same thing.

Leibniz's borrows a metaphor from the Hindus to explain this (another first for him - the first European philosopher to take both Indian and Chinese philosophy seriously) - the net of Indra. This is a net with a glass bead at the intersection of each thread, the point being that from the inside of each bead, all the other beads are imaged, but in a different way. Say the beads are numbered: then the numbers next to you in the net will look big, and the others gradually smaller until the distant ones merge into an indistinct horizon. Likewise each monad reflects every other within itself, such that what appears to be coming from the outside is actually coming from the inside. This is the limit of the metaphor: the beads are in space, but monads are not. The potential experience of every other monad is actually enfolded in every single monad, although most of this will never be unfolded for any given monad.

As well as having no windows and not being in space and time, monads are also individually indestructible. Only God can create or destroy them, and he can only do it all at once - i.e. the idea is that God created all the monads all at once, and if he destroyed one, that would amount to destroying them all. The monads are a whole, and that whole is identical to God. This seems to imply that God is nothing but all the monads all at once, and this implication got him into trouble with th church. In fact in his indomitable diplomatic way, he tried to start an ecumenical movement aimed at reconciling and re-uniting the Catholic and Protestant Churches; but like his League of Nations scheme, this failed, and he ended up rejected by both sides, rather than achieving their reconciliation.

So Leibniz is an idealist in both the metaphysical and the ordinary senses of the word. In the metaphysical sense, idealism means that our experience is like the movie the Matrix - not of objects like we think it is, but generated by something else - at which point the Matrix parts company with idealism, because the "something else" making us seem to be experiencing objects in the Matrix is just other objects in the future, whereas in idealism, the "something else" is ideas - in Leibniz's case, the idea of God ultimately, but less remotely, the idea of ourself, including the idea of our culture, our history, our parents, our lives. All our perceptions are relative to these ideas, and actually an indirect experience of them. So there's less difference he thinks between what we call a dream and what we call

awake than we think there is - all experiences, even our 'conscious' ones are actually symbolic representations of the substance that we actually are - spirit. (Secularized, this becomes Freud's theory of the unconscious via Nietzsche's theory of the drives, and so Leibniz has also been called the inventor of our modern idea of "the unconscious mind.")

And in the ordinary sense, he's an idealist who agrees with Plato about evil. Plato said there really is no such thing as evil. There's only ignorance. Even a gangster wants to be the best gangster ("the baddest gangster") - he's just confused about what is actually good as opposed to only apparently good. The problem is one of understanding say Leibniz, not will. All will is good will he thinks, but confused minds do damaging things because of lack of education ("society's to blame"). Likewise Leibniz thinks everyone wants the world to be ideal, and works on the basis of their level of understanding towards that aim, but some people are confused about what's ideal because they don't think through the consequences of their ideas. But as the human race progresses, we get gradually better at thinking through the consequences of what we do, and gradually things are thus getting better and better, and people are getting better and better, so he also invented the idea that later became Esperanto, the universal language in which everything would become clear, and thus would end all wars, which he thinks are always based on confusions and misunderstandings. Believing in God he thinks is thus effectively the same as thinking that this rate of improvement is the best it can be - that all is actually for the best in the best possible world, although it may not seem that way to a confused mind.

This is not really the ludicrous naiveté that Voltaire makes it out to be. Leibniz does not deny that suffering is a real experience, or that pain really hurts. What he means is that the bigger our perspective, the less it hurts. For in Leibniz's system, even God is constrained by a kind of necessity - he can't do what's impossible (this is the second big thing that got him in trouble with the church). He can't make a square circle. He can't make the bird fly without air, metaphorically speaking. He can't make a life without struggle. This is not a criticism of God he says (let alone a capital crime for which he should be executed), but an insight into the nature of reality. It's like Stoicism: suffering sucks, but it makes you stronger (within limits) and saves you from the hothouse flower syndrome.

So Leibniz fits into a religious tradition called monism. The most famous monism is Judaism. For Jews, there is one and only one God, and it doesn't make sense to say he has an opposite or opponent (the devil or whatever). There is no devil in Judaism ("Satan" just means "enemy" in both Hebrew and Arabic, and the Book of Job, in which Lucifer appears as a fallen angel, is a Persian incursion into the Hebrew old testament). In Judaism, there is no Devil, and no competition going on that God could conceivably lose. To monists, the thought that God could be a loser in any sense is ridiculous.

But not so to a gnostic. In contrast to monists, gnostics think that there are in some sense two Gods, and that our world is their battleground, and our souls are in fact the thing they are fighting over (this is the "secret knowledge" or in Greek "gnosis" from which the name comes). The oldest gnosticism is the Zoroastrianism of ca. 500 BC Persia (where the book of Job came from) which teaches that the God of Light and the God of Darkness are at battle, every night the GoD getting the upper hand (except for the little particles we call stars), every day the GoL getting back on top of the struggle come sunrise. Gnosticism in religion goes with body/soul dualism in metaphysics, and Zoroaster taught that our soul was a spark of divine light trapped in a prison of darkness called our body, which is continually trying to put the spark out, succeeding at the end of the day when we go to sleep; that success coming to an end as the spark gets the upper hand again and we wake up. In fact the body was made by the GoD to try to capture the GoL. Body bad, spirit good; body dark, spirit light; that sort of thing. Another gnostic called Mani lived a good 500 years later, and had a famous disciple called Augustine, who later converted to this new Jewish sect his mother followed called Christianity around 380 A.D. Into the

newly forming but still kind of Hebrew-monistic early Christianity, Augustine introduces a gnostic hangover from his Manichean days - the thought that life is a battlefield between good and evil, and either could win out in the end.

Now we come at last to what's really going on in Voltaire's attack on Leibniz. Voltaire is not a religious gnostic, but he is kind of a political and cultural one. The Gnostics thought the Jews had been duped: that the creator-God they worshiped was actually the God of Darkness, but they thought he was the God of Light. This is proven by their belief that he created this world - something the Gnostics said the good God would never do, this world being so obviously fucked up. According to Gnostics, the aim of religion is to teach you how to escape from this world, to get out of the clutches of the God of Darkness once and for all, and go through the portal we see as the sun, and to rejoin the infinite world of pure light beyond that portal. That we can do fully only at death, but in life we have at least fire; and a big part of Zoroastrianism is keeping the sacred flame alight - its still burning in northern Iran or Iraq or somewhere, with a splinter sect also in India, and today's Z's claim the flame has burnt continuously since Zoroaster (3,000 years).

Voltaire repudiates metaphysics, but he thinks something crucial is at stake in culture, and that it could go either way. It's not that things will always work out in the end - the clergy he thinks are cultural dupes, thinking that religion is good culture, but actually spreading darkness and fear and ignorance and superstition in the hearts of men. Great culture he thinks is secular, instinctual, artistic; it is the way certain individuals show everyone what humanity can achieve for itself, and not dream that some imaginary super-being could save it. Artists show humanity the creative power of the human mind; good art leads us onward and upward; bad art is corrupted into political ends (eg religion itself, which is deluded bad art according to Voltaire, and this leads straight to Nietzsche). But this is why he wants to mock Leibniz (aka Dr. Pangloss), and his belief that everything has to work out in the end for the best. He thinks that leads to a sort of culture of metaphysical laziness where we let ourselves off the hook and believe that the real struggle's going on elsewhere (heaven, hell, the future, the past, overseas). Voltaire's all about the suspicion of authority and the responsibility of human creativity, along with an artist's sensibility in that the ultimate questions always come down to style - hence he's the godfather of Baudelaire and Oscar Wilde as well as Nietzsche.

cheers, DavidR.