A Kind of Fantastic Fairy Tale: Is This All Leibniz Tells Us?
by David Kemp

My intention is not to précis all that Leibniz said, but to show in the space of thirty minutes what has struck me most about him. Most notably he takes on issues that most of us would be scared to touch: What sort of thing is being said when we speak of the way the world is? Is there some metaphysical structure on which we can hang the notion of the world being the way it is? And once all that's been sorted out, what sort of a world is it that can incorporate such items as mind, body, logic and even value? His genius consists not so much in devising knock-down answers to such questions but in his revealing, often despite himself, what it is about such questions that makes them so profoundly and ineluctably difficult. Unsurprisingly, his work is frequently hard to fathom, not least because it produces seeming inconsistencies sometimes within just pages of each other. Not only that, but his prose style is often lofty and unaccommodating: so much so that one is tempted to conclude that he regards his philosophical mission as one, not of illumination and clarification, but of imparting to lesser mortals his privileged take on what it's like to have shared in God's own experience.

Leibniz believes that the essence of reality is constituted by an infinitude of unanalysable and immaterial entities (or *monads*) that supervene on nothing and whose unanalysability in terms of something else constitutes the bedrock of what is. Because they are infinitely divisible, bodies are ruled out as candidates for constituting such a bedrock. Monads have their provenance not only in the traditional notion of substance, but also in the notions of subjectivity (in the sense of their being analogous to subjects of which properties are predicated), souls and minds. The attractions of minds as models for (rather than the same thing as) monads are various. Because minds are immaterial they are indivisible. However much the contents of a mind may change over time, there is still a strong sense of the persistence of the same mind. In virtue of their having content (as they arguably must in order to be regarded as minds in the first place) minds cannot but take on the role of being about (relating to, being expressive of) something other than themselves such as a world for example.

This mental analogy brings problems in its wake, however. If minds have to be about something other than themselves, we run the risk of being forced into acknowledging that they depend for their existence on whatever constitutes their intentionality. Yet mentally-analogous monads are supposed to depend on nothing. Furthermore, as his argument progresses, Leibniz finds it ever harder to write bodies out of this account of monads. Monads are said to be expressive of the world yet what sort of world would it be without body? Drawing on the monad-mind analogy, it is hard to imagine minds in whose intentionality bodies did not figure. We find that a significant part of the contents of our minds relates to bodies. And not only that: the raw feel of our apprehending the bodily aspect of the world is located to a significant extent in bodies of our own. Yet monads conceived of as analogous to minds were first introduced to overcome the metaphysical shortcomings of bodies.

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Leibniz's task is to identify that in virtue of which the world we are familiar with has the sort of ontology it does. He believes that we can think our way towards this position. The task, he thinks, is made easier by the truth of the Principle of Sufficient Reason (PSR), i.e. the fact that there is no truth for which a reason does not exist. But whether he regards the PSR as some kind of metaphysical necessity or as mere methodological tool is never entirely clear. It is also unclear whether he means that all truths are such that each must have an explanation or that there is some explanation such that it is the explanation all truths. But if every truth has its own explanation we will end up with a regress of explanations. "And as all this differentiation involves only other prior or more differentiated contingent things, all of which need a similar analysis to explain them, we are no further advanced: and the sufficient and ultimate reason must be outside the succession or *series* of this differentiation of contingent things, however infinite it may be."

(*Monadology* 1714 §37) To avoid this we have to go beyond the world to God whom we will come to know through an infinitude of self-like non-physical entities expressive of both him and the world he has created. But the fact remains that a perfect and rational God would hardly have created the world he did without his having had a reason so to do; and so the regress renews itself. Maybe we should regard the PSR as merely a way of describing how the world is and consign the question of why God should have created it thus to silence. The advantage of accepting the PSR is that it provides us with a holistic, fully connected-up universe in which everything can be accounted for in terms of everything else. Thus any individual item in the world can be regarded as an expression of the totality of the world itself. But because material individuals have the disadvantage of being infinitely divisible we have to use immaterial, metaphysical individuals to do the job of containing the totality of what is: hence the monad.

Not only does the world by its very nature lend itself to our having the kind of thoughts about it we do have, but thought itself is such that we are able to have any sort of take on anything at all in the first place. Leibniz thinks that the structure of thought is formed out of the links we intuit links between such things as assertion, negation, identity, contradiction, truth and falsity. He says that it follows from *A is A* (*A* is itself) and *A is* $\neg\neg A$ (*A* is that which is not what *A* is not) that (1) a some propositions are true and some false and (2) a proposition cannot be both true and false. He states quite clearly that such necessary truths bear "no relation to the free will of God or of creatures" (*Discourse on Metaphysics* 1686 §13). Not only are we thus capable of understanding necessity and abstraction, but in doing so *a priori* we are led - by the elimination of any alternative - to the notion of ourselves as the provenance of such truths: "for the notions I have of myself and of my thoughts, and consequently of being, substance, action, identity, and of many others, arise from an internal experience" (*ibid* §27). He then goes on to say that "in thinking of ourselves we think of being, of substance, of the simple and the compound, of the immaterial and of God himself….And these acts of reflection provide the chief objects of our reasoning" (*Monadology* 1714 §30). So it looks as though God has created us in such a way as to have endowed us with conceptual tools whose operation not even God himself can change.

Leibniz does not regard ours as the only possible world but merely as the best possible world, for God in all his perfection would have created none other. The perfection of God's creation consists in his having achieved the maximum of variety by the most economic means with the greatest possible degree of order. God's created world is thus a maximisation of the greatest degree of consistency (*ibid* §58). At first sight such a claim seems baffling. Prior to the act of creation was God presented with an array of possible yet-to-be-created worlds from which he chose to create the one he did because it was so perfect? But if that is so, what was the point of having a choice given his prior knowledge of what was perfect? And how did he decide that this rather than that constituted such perfection in the first place? My own view of such questions is that they are unanswerable. I prefer to claim that what Leibniz is saying is that although we don't know the contents of God's mind when he created the world (assuming that is how the world came about) we do know that it bears his imprint. Thus we know him only through his world-creating deeds. Part of his act of creation was to have created us, and part of how we have turned out to be is that we recognise such things variety, economy, consistency and order when they crop up in the world; and what is more, we value them in a way we do not value their opposites. In fact it is extremely difficult to conceive of ourselves as inhabiting either a world that does not lend itself to evaluation or one that does to which we ascribe no value. Thus value, world and God are for Leibniz inextricably connected. Value-ascription is not just some game we choose to play but an activity we cannot but partake in. It represents a further level at which the world is informed by God.

Let us turn now towards existence and its nature. Leibniz believes that we can conceive of non-existent but possible worlds. But he speaks also of items that could not exist in any world when (in an undated fragment) he says that "if A is B-not-B then A is a non-entity". Thus A's existence depends not so much on its intrinsic nature (if any) but on the nature of what is predicated of it, which in this case is a nothing. Such a subject is

instantiated in neither this world nor could be instantiated in any other. It as though for something to exist, something as opposed to nothing must be able to be said of it.

My reason for making this point is in part to emphasise the extent to which the ontological contours of Leibniz's system are shaped by subject-predicate sentences. For what determines such matters as existence, non-existence and possibility boils down to the instantiation (and possibility thereof) or non-instantiation of an individual's properties. Now for A to have a property is for A to be non-trivially characterised in terms of something else. So it is not surprising that Leibniz should regard the relationship between subject and predicate as providing a foundation for any characterisation of the fact that the world consists not of merely of things but of a certain kind of relationship between them. This will remind us of the operation of the PSR considered earlier.

So what is the nature of the relationship that finds itself expressed in subject-predicate propositions? If B can be predicated of A, is this because A can have any old predicate (apart from a contradiction) appended to it or is there something about A irrespective of its predicates that dictates what can be predicated of it? Leibniz would probably answer that such a question misses the point. In §8 of the *Discourse on Metaphysics* he asks us to consider what it is to be truly attributed to a certain subject. He says that "every *true* predication has some basis in the *nature of things*, and when a proposition is not identical, that is to say, when the predicate is not contained expressly in the subject [as in an analytic truth], it *must* be contained in it virtually ….The subject-term *must* therefore always include the predicate-term, in such a way that a man who understood the notion of the subject *perfectly* would also judge that the predicate belongs to it." This means that "it is the nature of an individual *substance, or complete being*, to have a notion so complete that it is sufficient to contain, and render deducible from itself, *all* the predicates of the subject to which this notion is attributed [my emphases]." So it looks as though when it is either the case or possible that A is B, it is in virtue of the way A is that either is true. Even when A is B is synthetic its truth can be read off from the nature of A but in just the same way as it could had the statement been analytic. The only thing that seems to stop all synthetic statements from collapsing into analyticity is the contingent fact that we simply don't know *a posterori* everything that is there to be known about A in all its infinitude. In fact Leibniz goes on to say that "there are in the soul of Alexander, from all time, traces of all that has happened to him, and marks of all that will happen to him – and even traces of everything that happens in the universe – though no one but God can know all of them." (*ibid*)

Leibniz repeatedly uses this notion of an immaterial soul that's a complete concept containing the entire universe as an analogy for the monad. Monads for him are the ultimate building blocks of the universe. The monad is a mind-like something whose unextendedness prevents it from being a subject of infinite analysis and whose intentionality is universal. Furthermore because it contains the entire and singular universe there is nothing left upon which it might supervene (and thus be analysed in terms of something else). Unanalysability is important for Leibniz since it designates a point at which the metaphysical buck might be said to stop. For he is looking for a reality conferring notion rather than one whose reality supervenes on (or can be analysed in terms of) something else. In fact it is such unity that constitutes existence itself: for "that which is not truly *one* entity is not truly one *entity* either" (Letter to Arnauld 30/04/1687).

So what exactly are monads and what exactly do they do? They are unanalysable, logically independent, reality-conferring and mind-like unities of how-it-is-ness whose intentionality is universal. In Leibniz's terms they mirror both God and each other and in so doing express the harmonious perfection of his creation (*Discourse on Metaphysics* §9; *Monadology* §56). An aspect of God's perfection additional to those set out above consists in his preference for creating something rather than nothing. This takes the form of creating a multiplication of perspectives as the means of obtaining as much variety as possible within a single universe, but with the greatest order and consistency possible, i.e. with as much perfection possible (*Monadology* §58). We return to the multiplicity of monads below.

Leibniz (*ibid* §§14,15) claims that part of what monads do is to have perceptions. At first sight this seems an odd attribution given our common understanding of what perception is. We regard perception as something of which we typically want to say that it involves such notions as (1) the causal impact of the physical on the mental and (2) our inability to conceive of a mind without its having some kind of usually physical intentionality. However Leibniz would reject (1) because "….perception and everything that depends on perception is inexplicable on mechanical principles – i.e. in terms of shapes and movements" (*ibid* §17). But (2) will turn out to be nearer to his position, as we shall see. What he actually says is that "The passing state which involves and represents a multitude [i.e. a take on all that is] in the unity [i.e. of the monad] or in the simple substance is nothing other than what one calls a *perception*" (*ibid* §14). Each monad contains the entire world in the same way as Alexander did. So it is unsurprising that we should find Leibniz saying that "A substantial unity requires a thoroughly indivisible and naturally indestructible being, since its notion includes everything that will happen to it, something which can be found neither in shape nor motion (both of which involve something imaginary, as I could demonstrate), but which can be found in a soul or substantial form, on the model of what is called *me*" (Letter to Arnauld 28/11 & 08/12/1686). Note that Leibniz conceives of monads here as being analogous to (rather than the same as) persons which makes it strange that two commentators have actually removed the words "on the model of" ("*à l'exemple de ce qu'on appelle moi*") from the translation they have cited. My interpretation of Leibniz's notion of monadic perception is therefore this. In having the perceptions they do minds reveal their universal intentionality. Such intentionality is universal because each individual perceptual item is accountable for in terms of everything else; for that is the way the world is structured. What it is like to be me is what it is like to have direct, experiential access to an aspect of the world. Such access produces truths which amount to "whatever we perceive immediately within ourselves, i.e. of which we are conscious in ourselves concerning ourselves. For it is impossible for these to be proved through other experiences which are closer and more intrinsic to us" (*Of Universal Synthesis and Analysis c.1683*). So because my access is direct I can't have some farther experience e.g. of my own behaviour with which I can check out the veracity of my original experience. But in perceiving within myself "I perceive not only I myself who am thinking, but also many differences in my thoughts; from which I gather that there are other things beside myself…." (*ibid*). If there were no me there would be no world as viewed by me; but if there was only me to be experienced my thoughts would be identical which they are not. The only notion I can get of myself is one of a me that is perceiving something other than me. It is analogously thus with extensionless monads. Each is no more than the world as mirrored or expressed by it. It is neither inside that world (in which case it would have to express itself expressing itself) nor outside it (because God would not have created a universe and then left something behind outside it); rather it *is* that aspect of the world it expresses. Each monad is what contains the aspect it expresses of the world. But the moment a monad becomes separated from the aspect of the world it expresses (or 'perceives' in Leibniz's sense) it becomes no more than a something about which nothing can be said, i.e. a non-entity. Paradoxically when monads cease to be world-expressive they cease to be at all, just as a mind without content is nothing.

No two monads are the same. Each monad appears to express the world from a different perspective rather in the way a town looks different according to the position from which one views it. But because each monad is unextended it cannot be said other than metaphorically to enjoy a particular vantage point. However the way in which monads are to be distinguished is on the basis not of their expressing one aspect of the world rather than another, but on that of the degree of distinctiveness with which each does so (see *Monadology* §60). This corresponds to the notion of Alexander's having "traces of everything that happens in the universe" I mentioned earlier. It is important to realise that God has seen to it each monad should express the world as infinitely connected-up, a place in which everything by its very nature reflects, complements, can be explained in terms of and harmonises with everything else. It is this inter-connectivity that enables us to predict the future and retrodict the past. Thus the fact that a monad expresses one aspect of the world more distinctly than it does the others does not prevent it from continuing to express the world in

its entirety albeit with varying degrees of distinctiveness. I think one needs to avoid the temptation to regard distinctiveness in terms of visual sharpness. What distinguishes monads is more the extent to which each is *readily* informative of how the world is. Although I could obtain the same information about getting from A to B by a mixture of pacing out routes on foot and trial and error as I could by using satellite navigation, the latter is still more 'economical' than the former.

Leibniz also believes that not only does each monad have differing perceptions but that each is in a state of permanent but barely perceivable flux for all that it remains forever the same monad. The provenance of such change cannot be the presence or action of other monads since monads do not impact on one another. Instead they change within themselves in accordance with the internal principle of each. Leibniz calls the action this principle their appetition (*ibid* §15). Appetition is the generalised striving by monads towards some end and takes the form of their tracking of perfection. In consequence of such striving their 'perceptions' change accordingly. This suggests that the perfection of the world God created consists in part of a striving for perfection however paradoxical though this may seem

Although all monads are mind-like, monads are still not minds as even the humblest atom expresses the universe in its own monadic way. But all minds are high-grade monads and as such provide us with the best account of how monads work. In describing what it is about minds that makes them monadic Leibniz reveals much about how he regards them both in themselves and in relation to bodies. So let's leave monads for the moment and think more about minds once more. Much of his thought is contained in his *Discourse on Metaphysics*. At first he claims in §26 that "nothing ever enters into our mind naturally from the outside". It doesn't have to because "the mind always expresses all its future thoughts [it can entertain e.g. intentions] and already thinks confusedly [e.g. it can conceive of events that have yet to occur] about all that it will ever think distinctly [e.g. experience in the here and now]. We could never be informed of anything whose idea we do not already have in the mind [e.g. something that is what it is not], an idea which is like the matter of which that thought is formed…." (*ibid*). Even so, where does the mind get its materials from? Having said in §27 that "…. it is always false to say that all our notions come from the external senses…" he goes on to say that many of our conceptual notions "arise from an internal experience" (see above). If these are the conceptual tools that enable us to think and be conscious, surely what we think *about* must come from somewhere? At this point he is prepared to concede in §28 that "there is no external cause acting on us except God alone". Thus "God alone is our immediate external object". But bewitched by language we go on talking about a quasi-causal relationship between minds and things just as "those who follow Copernicus do not cease saying that the sun rises and sets" (§27). In fact we have to forget about causality altogether. Minds (along with everything else) contain everything that has happened, is happening and will happen to them because that's the way God has created things. As James Joyce said in *Ulysses* "Hold to the now, the here, through which all future plunges to the past". It's not that there is no external world (there is and it's God) but that it isn't the sort of thing we think it is. God's way of operation is said in §30 to be that he "conserves and continually produces our being". My being for me consists of how it was, is and will be like to be me as displayed with varying levels of clarity and distinction, my mind being conceptually endowed in such a way that I can process all this into what I regard as beliefs about a world. This is not to say that Leibniz is a transcendental idealist in the making. For there *is* a knowable something external to me, namely God. I know God through the fact that the contents of my mind are expressions of the universe he has created. There is no question of our being deceived other than by ourselves: "And as God's view is always a true one, our perceptions are true also; it is our judgements which come from us and deceive us" (§14). What it is for my mind to have such contents as it does is what it is for me to have the notion of my being uniquely me through being uniquely impacted in the way I am by items other than me.

These thoughts are expanded in §33. The contents of the mind arise spontaneously out of its world-expressing nature. Hence "all that appears to it, all its perceptions, must arise in it spontaneously from its own nature". This means that there are no such things as empty minds waiting around for some bit of the

world to impact upon them and thereby make them world-expressive. Thus a mind without intentionality is not a mind at all. But because the nature of a mind is to express the entire world, such appearances "by themselves …. correspond to what happens in the whole universe". It is at this point we cease to talk solely metaphysics. This is because their correspondence is "more particularly and more perfectly to what happens in the body which is assigned to [such a mind]". And not only does each mind have a body assigned to it, but in expressing the state of the universe it expresses it "in accordance with the relation of other bodies to its own".

And so we are back with bodies, the very things whose infinite analysability gave them reduced ontological status. It seems that the harder we think about what is (which is what Leibniz as rationalist recommends) the more paradoxical things become. One response to this would be to say that all we have to go on is a world whose total reality (which includes the reality of us) is (1) known to God alone and (2) such that it appears to us in the way it does. A paradox of that reality is that not only is it external to us but that we are also part of it.