

Pauline Phemister

*Leibniz and the Environment*

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A person who was asked ‘How do I get from Leibniz to the Environment?’ might be tempted to reply ‘I would not start from there’. Pauline Phemister’s monograph demonstrates how misguided such a reply would be. True, the journey is not without its difficulties. We are fortunate, therefore, to have as our guide a scholar whose acquaintance with the Leibnizian corpus is second to none. Naturally enough, we are following Phemister’s own interpretation of Leibniz, but she is careful to point out where alternative readings might take us along a different path. But nor are we simply following a path dictated by that interpretation. Rather is this a new path forged by a sympathetic understanding of Leibniz coupled with some gentle yet strategic nudgings on the author’s part. These ‘recastings’ are justified by the presumption that ‘Leibniz himself . . . would not have objected to the adaptation of his views’ (p. 7). At the same time Phemister is robust in her retention of Leibniz’s Judaeo-Christian understanding of God, arguing forcefully that ‘Leibniz’s philosophy has value and interest as much for the secular environmentalist as it does for the theist’ (p. 8).

Two main starting-points govern her discussion. First is the view that we are currently engulfed in a series of environmental crises due in no small part to current patterns of human behaviour. Second is the view, associated most particularly with the stance of ‘deep ecology’, that our choices and behaviours are underpinned by a set of deeply held, though often unacknowledged, metaphysical beliefs. Hence the quest for an alternative metaphysics that might inspire different choices and different behaviours. This takes Phemister to Leibniz.

The deep ecologists themselves had turned rather to Spinoza for their inspiration, and Phemister’s first task is to explain why she thinks this won’t do. In the space of a largely sympathetic account of Spinoza, and of Arne Naess’s re-envisioning of Spinoza, Phemister nevertheless draws attention to some of the unwelcome implications of Spinoza’s absolute monism (ch. 1). Chief among these are its sublimation of the individual within the whole and the total absence of contingency. Completing the ‘introductory’ section of the book there is, first, an admirably succinct yet accessible outline of Leibniz’s philosophy (ch. 2) of which the central characters are ‘monads’ – perceiving, appetitive centres of force that are endowed with an organic body. You and I are monads, as is the smallest conceivable entity. Each monad, itself indivisible, unifies its own organic body which, in turn, is divisible into smaller monads. Hence, there are monads ‘all the way down’. The co-existence of monads constitutes space; the succession of monads constitutes time. Thus, Leibniz’s world is through and through pluralistic, dynamic and teleological. There follows (ch. 3) a selective account of later thinkers influenced by Leibniz that focuses on features of his philosophy with which Phemister herself will later engage.

In chapter 4 we begin to extract the more satisfactory metaphysical framework for which Phemister is searching. ‘Leibniz’s vision of the world is fundamentally biological’, she observes (p. 75). Moreover, every living thing strives to preserve and perfect its being, and because it mirrors the beauty and perfection of God’s creation, contributes to the beauty and perfection of the universe. Every living thing is therefore of value. But inanimate things too,

being aggregates of living creatures that lack only a unifying monad, make a unique and beautiful contribution to the variety of the whole. In Leibnizian metaphysics therefore, Phemister finds reason for regarding ‘both the organic and inorganic as valuable and as worthy of ethical and aesthetic consideration’ (p. 89).

In chapter 5, Phemister mounts a Leibnizian defence of two theses. The first is the thesis that intrinsic properties may be both ‘essential *and* relational’ (p. 95). For, ‘*intrinsic relational* properties are essential in characterising each individual [substance] in all its particularity’ (p. 97). Thus, every substance contributes to the identity of every other substance. The second is the thesis that ‘instrumental and intrinsic values, considered as relational values, are inextricably intertwined and mutually supporting’ (p. 105). Thus, ‘every being has some direct or indirect instrumental value in respect of all other beings’ (p. 105). In a telling application of this insight she observes that if we humans want to increase our own intrinsic relational value (rather than proclaiming our intrinsic value and wreaking havoc the while) we would do well to ‘focus rather on the ways in which we might serve as instruments that further the interests of others’ (p. 107).

But the deeply relational nature of individual substances does not yet ground the attachments to our environments that the environmentalist would demand. To meet this point Phemister advances what is perhaps her most significant ‘adaptation’ of Leibniz’s views (ch. 6) – the (real) existence of a *psychical* space and place that is parallel to physical space – a ‘value-space’ (pp. 122–7). This opens up ways of conceiving space and place not simply as quantitative but also as ‘qualitatively rich, imbued with ethical, aesthetic and spiritual value’ (p. 112). And if we further enlarge Leibniz’s understanding of love to embrace the taking of pleasure in the ‘perfection, well-being or *specific good* of the other’ (p. 120), rather than just their happiness, of which only rational beings are capable, we may feel love, albeit varying in degree, for all living things and, ultimately, for inanimate beings also.

Because a soul is ‘windowless’, we can have no direct access to it; but because souls and bodies are exact expressions of each other – a state referred to as ‘communicative harmony’ – we can read the state of the soul from the appearance of the body (p. 137). This in turn makes empathy possible (ch. 7) or, in Leibniz’s terms, the act of ‘putting oneself in the place of the other’ (p. 148). Leibniz himself advocates the ‘other place’ strategy only with regard to humans; but given the ‘harmonious communication between all living things’ (p. 149) it is not difficult to envisage adopting the strategy with regard to non-humans and humans alike.

In her final chapter, after defending the view that both progress and freedom are possible in a Leibnizian world, Phemister finds reasons why we should direct compassionate empathic communication towards future beings as well as those who are co-present; and why, on finding ‘the good that is assuredly there in the best possible world’, we should seek to ‘bring about a future that improves upon the past’ (p. 169). As a parting shot, she sees good Leibnizian reasons also why we should heed Voltaire’s advice in *Candide* and tend our gardens, for these are after all ‘relational psychical places of value’ wherein we may indeed find perfection (p. 175).

Historians of philosophy will find much in this volume to intrigue and perhaps also provoke. Environmentalists, even those who would whole-heartedly endorse both of Phemister’s starting-points, might not naturally think of Leibniz as their first port of call. Yet, as Phemister convincingly demonstrates, there are many key elements of a satisfactory

metaphysics to be extracted from Leibniz's philosophy. Even those who baulk at embracing the whole package will nowhere find a more challenging and satisfying medium against which to test and temper such diverging metaphysical beliefs as they wish to retain, than in this volume.

ALAN HOLLAND

University of Lancaster