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Book Review: Leibniz On The Trinity And The Incarnation: Reason And Revelation In The Seventeenth Century

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The book's last two chapters, by William Hasker and Derk Pereboom, do not pertain strictly speaking to Molinism but are nonetheless quite engaging. Pereboom defends hard determinism, with its denial of moral desert as a fundamental kind, as an option for Christians. Pereboom demonstrates that determinists have a lot of resources for making sense of praise, blame, guilt, and repentance. He reminds us that many theodicies, including Hick's soul-making account or Marilyn Adams's account of the value of identification with Christ, do not require a strong doctrine of free will. Pereboom's challenge deserves careful response from the defenders of libertarian free will.

William Hasker argues, quite convincingly by my lights, for the superiority of a "general-policy" theodicy to a "specific-benefit" theodicy in accounting for "natural evils" (pain, suffering and death, including that of non-human and even pre-human creatures). He also raises legitimate questions about the epistemological consequences for ordinary human action of the skeptical theist strategy. However, I am puzzled by Hasker's assumption that a general-policy theodicy is unavailable to those, like Molinists, Thomists, or theological determinists, who believe in meticulous Providence. Hasker seems to overlook the possible application to God of the doctrine of double effect: the distinction between those consequences of God's plan that are intended from those that are merely foreseen. Just because God foresees that a certain general policy will result in specific harms for specific creatures, it doesn't follow that God must intend those harms, nor (a fortiori) that God must intend those specific harms for the sake of specific benefits. Hasker may assume that God's love for and justice toward individuals would require some compensating benefit to each creature to whom some specific harm is foreseen, but this neglects the possibility that the very identity of that creature might be essentially tied to the set of God's actual general policies and to a set of causally prior conditions, in such a way that it is metaphysically impossible for that creature to exist without running afoul of that specific harm. (See Robert M. Adams's "Evil and Self-Identity."⁹)

Leibniz on the Trinity and the Incarnation: Reason and Revelation in the Seventeenth Century, by Maria Rosa Antognazza. Trans. Gerald Parks. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2007. xxv + 322pp. \$60 hardcover.

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Leibniz is universally acknowledged as one of the great philosophers, but his writings on Christian doctrines have been largely ignored. Partly this is a function of the interests of the philosophers who have written

⁹"Existence, Self-Interest, and the Problem of Evil," *Noûs* 13 (1979), 53–65.

about him, but it also reflects the difficulty of accessing the sources for his theological ideas. Maria Rosa Antognazza has taken a large step towards remedying this neglect with her exhaustively researched monograph on Leibniz's views concerning the Trinity and the Incarnation, as well as on the closely related topic of faith and reason. One result of her work should be to quell any remaining suspicion that Leibniz's belief in these doctrines of orthodox Christianity was other than sincere. Leibniz could be less than candid about his views when he thought a more explicit statement might cause offense, and sometimes in discussion he entertained favorably ideas that he did not actually accept, when he hoped those ideas might render his overall view more acceptable to an interlocutor. (See Robert Adams's *Leibniz*.) But the notion that he could have sustained an interest in explaining and defending the doctrines of Trinity and Incarnation throughout his lifetime, and in many diverse writings, merely as some sort of diplomatic maneuver, is simply incredible. His sincerity is underscored in that at certain points he rejected views that were commonly accepted in his own Lutheran church, in favor of those held in the Reformed communion. (For instance, he opposed the doctrine of the *communicatio idiomatum*, the "communication of attributes" between the two natures of Christ, which was generally accepted by Lutheran theologians but not by the Reformed.) Antognazza writes, "That Leibniz was serious about theology (and . . . the theology of the Trinity in particular) is immediately obvious to anyone who reads Leibniz's work without the distorting lens of modern priorities" (5). She points out that his doctrinal views remained quite consistent throughout his lifetime. At the same time, the theological discussion called into play many of the central ideas of Leibniz's philosophy, and so the explanations of theological doctrines gradually developed along with the philosophy. She upholds the claim that "Leibniz's views on the Trinitarian nature of God and the metaphysical structure of the universe are neither contradictory nor unconnected but, rather, coexist comfortably in Leibniz's thought, perhaps even reinforcing one another" (xx).

Leibniz's writings on Trinity and Incarnation were for the most part called forth by the Socinian controversy, which continued throughout his lifetime. These writings provide a helpful window through which to observe the varying stages of this controversy, which has received little or no attention during the recent discussions of Trinitarian doctrine. Perhaps special interest will attach to the controversy with the English Socinians (they were the first to call themselves "Unitarians"), with whom Leibniz was occupied beginning about 1690. Reading about the variety of Trinitarian views at this time, one who has followed the recent discussions might be led to ask what is new under the sun? There were the "Latin Trinitarians" (as we would now call them) such as John Wallis, who were accused (rightly or wrongly) of modalism and Sabellianism. There were the "Social Trinitarians" such as William Sherlock, accused in their turn of being tritheists. Only the labels, one might say, are actually new! There

were also the antitrinitarians, such as Stephen Nye, who mounted vigorous criticisms of all the Trinitarian views on offer.

Leibniz's response to this English controversy begins by emphasizing the absolute monotheism of the Christian religion. There cannot be three absolute, infinite, omnipotent, eternal, and sovereignly perfect substances, since this would mean three gods. Subordinationism, which holds that the Son and the Holy Spirit are divine in some lesser sense than the Father, is also rejected. And Sabellian modalism, in which the persons of the Trinity are three names or three aspects of one and the same being, is unacceptable. It is necessary to hold that "the Father is God, the Son is God, and the Holy Spirit is God, and each one of these is not the other; and that, with all this, there are not three gods but only one God" (103). This, however, appears to be a contradiction, which is something that must absolutely be avoided. Leibniz's way of avoiding it is to say that the word "God" is used differently in the different contexts: "Therefore one must say that in the first case the word 'God' is understood as a person of the divinity, of which there are three, and in the second case as an absolute substance that is unique" (103). In this way Leibniz is able to assert, contrary to the Socinians, that the doctrine of the Trinity has not been shown to be contradictory.

What has been said so far, however, is largely negative; is it possible to go further by way of an explanation of the doctrine? Leibniz expresses a preference for staying with the language in which the doctrine has been stated by scripture and the church. Nevertheless, he feels the need to provide something of a positive explanation, and in doing so the category of relation becomes important. He does not hold that the persons *are* relations, as has sometimes been said, but they are constituted *through* relations. "One should then say that there are relations within the divine substance that distinguish the persons from each other; since these persons cannot be absolute substances. But one should also say that these relations must be substantial and that they are not sufficiently explained by simple modalities. Also one should say that the divine persons are not the same concrete being under different denominations or relations, as one man could be both a poet and an orator; but three different concrete relative beings in a single absolute concrete being" (107).

Leibniz admits that we know of no example in nature that corresponds exactly to what is said of the divine persons. But we don't need such an example: "the divine substance has without doubt privileges that go beyond every other substance" (107). The best analogy that can be found, he thinks, is the Augustinian analogy of the mind and its knowledge of itself—or, as he also states, "power, knowledge, and will, or love" (110). However he recognizes the limitations of this analogy (as did Augustine himself), and states, "I do not at all undertake to claim that the difference between the three divine persons is no greater than that between 'that which understands' and 'that which is understood' when a finite spirit thinks about itself" (109).

This review will not attempt to determine to what extent Leibniz's explanation of the Trinity is satisfactory. Perhaps enough has been said, however, to enable the reader to see why this doctrine raises important issues concerning the relationship of faith and reason. These issues are specially relevant because the Trinity and the Incarnation are prime examples of the category of theological doctrines known as "mysteries" — doctrines which have traditionally been said to be "above reason" but not "contrary to reason." This traditional view was opposed both by the Socinian rationalists and by pietists such as Pierre Bayle, both of whom in effect collapsed the distinction between "above reason" and "against reason." The rationalists accordingly rejected as irrational any doctrine not certified by rational argument; the pietists maintained that, in the case of revealed truths, reason should be rejected in favor of faith.

Leibniz's position was more subtle. In recognizing the status of Trinity and Incarnation as mysteries he gives up (as have almost all theologians) any possibility of demonstrating the truth of these doctrines by rational argument. Instead, he invokes on their behalf a "presumption of truth" based on their attestation in revelation and in the tradition of the universal church. (Compare the "presumption of innocence" recognized in law.) This presumption is however defeasible, so the arguments of opponents must be attended to. To be sure, arguments asserting merely that the Trinity (for instance) is improbable have little force; it was never claimed to begin with that this doctrine is probable from the standpoint of unaided human reason. But if the doctrine could be shown to be contradictory, this would be a proof of its falsehood and the doctrine would have to be given up.

But this leads to yet another difficulty: how can reason demonstrate the noncontradictoriness, and thus the possibility, of a doctrine which is admitted to exceed its powers of comprehension? There is no example in nature of the precise sort of multiplicity in unity that is found in the Trinity. A formal demonstration of consistency could be given if the doctrine could be "reduced to its elements, that is, into other terms whose possibility is known." But this cannot be done: "the application to the mysteries of an a priori demonstration [of possibility] would imply the complete elimination of the suprarational sphere, in that it would coincide with adequate knowledge" (xvi). Put differently, we simply do not understand the mysteries well enough to reduce them to their logical elements in the way described.

Leibniz's response to this dilemma is to adopt the "strategy of defense." Given the presumption of truth, the burden of proof shifts to the opponents of the doctrines in question. And this means that a general proof of possibility or noncontradictoriness is not required; it is sufficient to meet the arguments of the opponents, and to show that they have not succeeded in demonstrating the impossibility or the contradictoriness of the Trinity and the Incarnation. Accordingly, this is the task Leibniz sets himself—as we have already seen, in a greatly abbreviated form, in the discussion given above.

In order for us to believe these doctrines, however, it is not sufficient (though it is necessary) to refute the charge that they are contradictory. We must also have a grasp of the meaning of the formulas we endorse—but how is this possible, given that the mysteries exceed the power of human reason to comprehend? Leibniz's answer is that "although one cannot arrive at an adequate comprehension of the mysteries, in order for these to be justifiably placed in the cognitive sphere it is sufficient to have a confused knowledge of their meaning. . . . Leibniz readily acknowledges that we do not have a clear and distinct knowledge of the concepts of 'nature,' 'substance,' and 'person' when they are used with reference to the divine sphere. Yet our use of them, even when it is extended to the explanation of the mystery of the Trinity, is nevertheless justified precisely because knowledge is not limited to what is clear and distinct. However imperfect and inadequate the resulting explanations may be, one should not forgo them" (xix).

We are all indebted to Professor Antognazza for her lovingly crafted monograph. It should prove to be indispensable for students of Leibniz, and a valuable resource for all those who consider the doctrines of Trinity and Incarnation as well as the relationship between faith and reason.

Why Political Liberalism? On John Rawls's Political Turn, by Paul Weithman. Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2010. 379pp. \$65.00 cloth.

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John Rawls is famous for having formulated the most influential account of justice in contemporary philosophy and then, shortly thereafter, having backed away from it. Why did Rawls change his mind about justice? In the Introduction to *Political Liberalism* (*PL*), Rawls offers an explanation. Rawls writes that we must see the changes he made to the position defended in *A Theory of Justice* "as arising from trying to resolve a serious problem internal to justice as fairness, namely from the fact that the account of stability in part III of *Theory* is not consistent with the view as a whole. I believe all the differences are consequences of removing that inconsistency" (*PL*, xv–xvi).

According to the dominant reading of Rawls, the "inconsistency" to which Rawls refers is this. An overarching aim in *Theory* is to present an account of justice that could form the basis for a stable liberal democracy. However, the account he offers—justice as fairness—is broadly Kantian. But in a well-ordered liberal democracy, there is reasonable pluralism regarding comprehensive perspectives. Because of this pluralism, justice as fairness is much too controversial to serve as the shared basis of the principles of justice in a liberal democracy; it is, after all, the expression of yet another comprehensive perspective. Rawls's solution to this