Beyond Pangloss | PeterBerkowitz.com

The New Republic, April 7, 1997

Beyond Pangloss by Peter Berkowitz

A review of Leibniz' Universal Jurisprudence: Justice as the Charity of the Wise by Patrick Riley. Harvard University Press. 338 pp. $39.95.

In the final lines of his introduction to this engaging and elegant study of the moral and political philosophy of Leibniz, Patrick Riley offers a startling reason for re-examining the thought of the great but neglected early modern philosopher: "it is possible, if admittedly not very likely, that Leibniz is simply right." One can almost hear the derisive chuckles and see the rolling eyes with which the mere posing of such a possibility will be greeted by many readers in the academy. The notion that any thinker, let alone a speculative metaphysician and a rationalist theologian such as Leibniz, is "right" and "simply right," will appear, in the proudly anti-foundational universe of professional political philosophy, as quaint, or worse.

Among students of morality and politics, the contemporary inhospitableness to metaphysics, or speculation about the character of reality, reflects a convergence of opinions from many quarters. John Rawls has famously argued for a liberal conception of justice that is "political, not metaphysical." The virtue of such a conception, in his view, is that it can be articulated and defended without taking sides on controversial questions about first principles or theoretical foundations. Jurgen Habermas, perhaps the leading contemporary European social and political theorist, goes further, expounding a "discourse ethics" and a proceduralist or "deliberative" view of democracy that he claims is "postmetaphysical" in the sense that it takes sides against the idea of a human nature and other philosophical foundations. The social sciences continue to be governed by a positivism that distinguishes sharply between facts that are knowable and values --- that is, beliefs about the right and the good --- that are subjective and not subject to rational vindication. And the most popular flavors of recent seasons, postmodernism and pragmatism, are no less hostile to questions about first principles and the grounds of the right and the good. Metaphysics has no friend in an "incredulity toward metanarratives," as postmodernism has been defined, and the Deweyan democrats, led by Richard Rorty, who has done so much to bring pragmatism up to date, will also have little use for it, and they are interested only in what is useful.

All their differences notwithstanding, the dominant methods or approaches to moral and political inquiry in the academy are one in banishing metaphysical speculation about the right and the good from the realm of serious thought. Like all orthodoxies, today's orthodoxy imposes costs on the spirit of free inquiry. It lulls the mind into thinking that the study of moral and political life can be theory-free. It peremptorily rules out of order an entire class of

questions about the sources of the moral life. And, in advance of actual inquiry, it makes it impossible to account for, or to mount a reasoned defense of, certain widely cherished moral principles and political ideals.

Consider, for example, the idea of justice as universal benevolence. It is a conception of justice that has come to be inseparable from the liberal mind (and it happens to lie at the heart of Leibniz's "universal jurisprudence". As Charles Taylor has argued, a commitment to justice understood as universal benevolence runs deep in the contemporary culture of the West. This commitment is manifest in widespread acceptance of the familiar idea that all human beings must be treated with equal respect without regard to race, class, sex, culture or religion; in the numerous declarations of universal human rights; and in the many humanitarian efforts to fight poverty and to relieve suffering not only at home but around the globe. But, as Taylor has also pointed out, this pervasive commitment to equal respect for all vastly exceeds our capacity to explain or rationally defend it. Most of us do not doubt the existence of human rights, but few of us have the slightest idea of where such rights come from or why they are worth respecting.

This disparity between the force of our belief in universal human dignity and our power to articulate good reasons for it is not merely theoretically interesting. It is also a source of practical concern, since it invites its own forms of zealotry, hypocrisy and enslavement. In the absence of the guidance that comes from firm principles and secure standards, there is a heightened risk that those endowed with a passion for justice will feel at liberty to pursue ends and to adopt means that fail to respect the humanity of other human beings. At the same time, the absence of good grounds for shared values creates wonderful opportunities for cynicism, as people come to casually profess ideals that no longer serve as reasons for sacrifice or even as motives for action. Worst of all, perhaps, the articulate defenders of inarticulacy in matters of fundamental importance foster a conviction of the groundlessness of the good that threatens to reduce us in our own eyes to slaves of chance and necessity.

The opinion, popularized by Richard Rorty, that metaphysical speculation has its roots in a primitive and perverse impulse arising out of alienation from ordinary language and estrangement from everyday life, is not a timeless truth; it is, at best, a diagnosis of restricted reach, applicable to certain thinkers in a particular time and a particular place who have lost their way in their own fog of concepts. Fortunately, there is a more plausible understanding of metaphysics, one that is more faithful to the ambiguities inscribed in ordinary language and the elusive and multivalent experiences of everyday life. On this view, metaphysics is nothing other than the final stages in the attempt to pursue the why? as far as the argument requires it, as far as the mind will take one; and it has its natural origins in the child's desire to understand --- in his enviable and easily lost ability to perceive the world as the vast and mysterious place that it is.

It is Patrick Riley's contention that Leibniz is to be admired because he saw so clearly that justice needs a reasoned defense, and that the reasoned defense of justice ultimately depends on an understanding of the human soul and the cosmos of which the soul is a part. And Riley also honors Leibniz for his tenacious and systematic effort to provide a rational defense of a particular conception of justice: justice understood as universal benevolence. This is not all there was to Leibniz, of course, and Riley weaves into his account of Leibniz's universal jurisprudence an appreciation of Leibniz's achievements in a remarkable range of roles and fields.

A groundbreaking mathematician and scientist who, in 1673, in his late 20s, was named a member of the Royal Society, Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz was trained in law and served as a court official, diplomat and official historian of the Electorate of Hanover. In addition, he engaged in a voluminous correspondence (which Riley draws on extensively), much of which dealt with his political hopes for the reunification of Christendom under the joint authority of the Pope and the Holy Roman Empire. But it is Leibniz's metaphysics --- expounded most prominently in the Theodicy (1710), a vindication of God's justice, and the Monadology (1714), an account of substance and the soul --- that lies at the heart of Riley's study of Leibniz's universal jurisprudence. One reason for this, as Riley emphasizes, is that Leibniz's metaphysics undergirds his moral and political theory. But there is another reason, in some tension with the first. It is Riley's claim that Leibniz, from beginning to end, was a moralist whose moral intentions directed, and in some cases determined, his metaphysical speculations.

In seeking to create afresh an appreciation of Leibniz's philosophy, Riley faces an uphill battle. And this is not only because of the anti-metaphysical prejudices of the day. Bertrand Russell, who devoted an important early book to certain logical aspects of Leibniz's metaphysical speculations, characterized Leibniz's social thought as a "mass of inconsistencies" and accused Leibniz of "disreputable subterfuges" in defense of his royalist patrons. Hegel, in his history of philosophy, had derided Leibniz's claim that great evil must be understood as necessary in the best of all possible worlds. And Leibniz has the dubious distinction of being the only major modern philosopher to have had his central doctrines mocked in a masterpiece of literature. In Candide, Voltaire wickedly ridicules Leibniz by reducing his philosophy to a handful of metaphysical cliches and putting them into the mouth of that fatuous old fool Dr. Pangloss, who offers them up to explain, or to explain away, all misfortune great and small.

Riley scrupulously reports all this, and goes out of his way to give Leibniz's critics their due. Indeed, it is a tribute to his own sympathetic exposition that Riley may well outdo Leibniz's previous critics by bringing into full view and meticulously inspecting certain structural weaknesses in his thought. Riley's intellectual portrait of Leibniz amounts to a rather severe critique of the internal coherence of his system. But that is hardly the end of the story. Riley maintains, staunchly and persuasively, that the moral vision that animates Leibniz's system is itself generous and benevolent and deserving of serious consideration.

In what does this moral vision consist? It is formed, Riley argues, by a synthesis of the Christian or Pauline doctrine that charity, or love for the well-being of others, is the highest of the virtues, with the Platonic doctrine of "eternal moral verities" that are intelligible to the mind's eye. The eternal and unchanging principles of justice, which Leibniz conceived of as connected by a kind of geometric necessity, are as binding on God in His perfection, in Leibniz's view, as they are on human beings in our imperfection. To hold otherwise, Leibniz argued, and to believe that God creates the principles of justice, was to turn God into a tyrant who ruled the world by arbitrary will and overpowering force. God, whose necessary existence and complete perfection Leibniz thought could be demonstrated by reason, is both the wise architect and the just monarch of the world. Indeed, He rules the world justly through His wise construction of it. His love or wise charity for His creatures consists in fashioning, out of the infinity of possible universes and in accordance with the eternal principles of justice, the best of all possible worlds.

As all experience attests, however, the world in which we find ourselves is full of imperfection and evil. But this imperfection and evil is, in Leibniz's account, the result of the limitation and the partiality that are necessary features of all that God brings into existence. Things cannot be other than they are because God, in fashioning each simple substance or monad, including the rational substances or monads called souls, determines in advance all actions and events and organizes them in accordance with a pre-established harmony that makes this on the whole the best possible world. And yet divine determination does not destroy human freedom. It is, quite the contrary, freedom's source and justification. Divine determination makes freedom possible by endowing every human being with the capacity to rise above impulse and appetite. It gives freedom a purpose, which is the actualization of justice.

Although he insists that the destiny of a particular individual is, or will be, inscribed in the soul that God fashions, Leibniz nevertheless argues that human beings are morally responsible, because our beliefs and our actions proceed from internal principles constitutive of our souls. Human beings are monads, or substances of the highest order, by virtue of our ability to know and to judge and to organize our lives in accordance with what is good. Each human being is a unique individual representing the universe from a singular perspective, yet every man and woman is equally bound by the eternal and uncreated principles of justice.

The "crowning element" of Leibniz's political theory, according to Riley, is the "idea of a just 'universal monarchy under a wisely charitable' God." The primary and distinctive focus of Leibniz's universal jurisprudence is not the art of ruling, or the causes that preserve and destroy actual regimes, or the structure of government and the formal procedures for the adjudication of controversies; it is the moral and political relation in which human beings stand to God. Its most radical implication, politically, is the depreciation of law in favor of charity and mercy; or, rather, the transformation of justice into a law of love. Leibniz's view differs from Plato's, according to whom justice is a virtue of the soul that is most fully exercised not in looking out for the well-being of all others but in loving knowledge wisely. It

differs from the Christian understanding, which holds that charity depends not on the perfection of the intellect but on the purity of the heart. And it differs from contemporary liberal and democratic perspectives, which, though they take universal benevolence as an ideal, feel no compulsion to provide rational grounds for their belief in the autonomy of human agents or to explain how human dignity is possible in a materialist universe that seems to exclude the incorporeal and rational substances that Leibniz calls souls.

As rational substances, human beings belong to the City of God, and, as Leibniz states in the final section of the Monadology, "this truly universal monarchy, is a moral world within the natural world, and is the most exalted and the most divine of the works of God." Under the perfect government that prevails in the City of God, all good deeds are rewarded, all wicked acts are punished, and virtue consists in discerning and taking pleasure in the perfection that each individual is capable of achieving, and in learning to love the world as an expression of God's justice or wise charity.

Summaries are inescapably caricatures. This is especially true in the case of Leibniz, a summary of whose thought really can put one in mind of Pangloss. Still, as Riley demonstrates in rich detail, much of the interest of Leibniz's philosophy is owed to his perseverance in seeking to reconcile essential but antagonistic elements. Indeed, Riley's exposition is in large measure a patient examination of the "grave difficulties" that haunt Leibniz's system.

One such "painful" difficulty concerns human freedom and divine determination. After thoroughly exploring the matter from many angles, Riley concludes that Leibniz does not provide a plausible account of how human spontaneity and autonomy, which are critical to Leibniz's defense of the moral life, can coexist with God's authorization of all of our opinions and acts. Another "troublesome" difficulty concerns evil and God's justice. Riley's judgment, following exhaustive examination of the sources, is that Leibniz fails to give a satisfactory explanation as to how the creation of a world full of evil and imperfection is consistent with God's wise charity. These difficulties, needless to say, are not minor. They haunt the whole of Leibniz's metaphysical enterprise, as well as his articulation of a universal jurisprudence.

There is at least one difficulty that Riley forces into the light of day without stating it clearly and with force. In expounding Leibniz's universal jurisprudence, Riley on occasion speaks of Leibniz's "derivation" of morality from natural reason. But, in so doing, Riley uses a technical term in what his own analysis suggests is a very loose fashion. As Riley discreetly indicates, in critical cases the more precise characterization of the movement in Leibniz's philosophy may well be the imputation of roots in natural reason to his own favored opinions about God's justice and the eternal order: "The Preface to the Theodicy is, again, a kind of religion within the limits of reason alone --- even if reason reveals rather more to Leibniz than it ever did to Kant."

Riley, in short, leaves little doubt that Leibniz never manages to make his arguments consistent and his system coherent. And, in the conclusion of his book, Riley goes even further, ruling out in passing the very possibility of any successful renewal of Leibniz's universal jurisprudence: "In many ways Leibnizian wise charity' is the last flowering (or last gasp) of a long and distinguished Graeco-Roman-Christian tradition which was to be definitively overturned by Hume, Rousseau, and Kant no more than a half-century after Leibniz's death." Riley seems to be saying that Enlightenment thought, culminating in Kant's critical philosophy, dealt a death blow to the philosophy of classical antiquity as well as to theology based on biblical faith.

Thus, at the end of his book Riley definitively sets aside the suggestive possibility with which he began, that Leibniz's teaching was "simply right." And yet he stays with his hero. Riley seems strangely unfazed by his categorical judgment that Leibniz's views are wrong in ways that place his system beyond hope of repair. Riley is content to commend Leibniz's system as a pleasant dream that could never have been real, but can somehow still edify: "Who can doubt that the world would be better if Leibnizian universal jurisprudence were in place --- if every rational substance in the universe not only refrained from harm but rejoiced in the perfection' of others? Who can doubt that the world would be best if wise charity and universal benevolence actually prevailed? Only an ungenerous heart would fail to be moved by so generous a moral vision."

Riley, it seems, admires Leibniz's aspirations more than his arguments, and loves the morality at which Leibniz's philosophical system aims more than the system of philosophy. But doesn't Riley's confession finally confirm the contemporary anti-foundational prejudice --- a restatement, really, of a very old accusation --- that accounts of justice built on views about God or "eternal moral verities" are more wishes or dreams than serious things? And does not Riley's final verdict, precisely by virtue of his sympathy for metaphysical speculation and his manifest love for Leibniz's universal jurisprudence, leave metaphysics, the exploration of first things and fundamental principles, more exposed and more vulnerable than before? After such a vindication, who needs a refutation?

Riley himself provides an obscure and perhaps inadvertent clue to a different sort of vindication in developing one of the guiding themes of his book: Leibniz's deep debt to Plato. In line with the tradition of Christian neo-Platonism that Leibniz followed, Riley equates Platonism with the view that moral and political life should be governed by the wise in light of " eternal moral verities." In this connection, Riley emphasizes that "Leibniz's devotion to the doctrine of Plato's Euthyphro is clear." What Leibniz (and Riley) takes to be the clear doctrine of Plato's dialogue on piety is that the just is not good because it is divinely willed. The truth is just the reverse. It is because the just is good that it is willed by the gods or God.

But there are reasons to doubt that this is really the doctrine of the Euthyphro or any other Platonic dialogue. That Riley himself harbors such a doubt is reflected in the variety of ways in which he refers to Leibniz's so-called Platonism. Often Riley refers to Platonism without

qualification; but sometimes he places Platonism and Platonic in inverted commas, alluding to Leibniz's "demi-Platonism," or speaking of a "quasi-Platonic tendency" in Leibniz's thought. Perhaps Riley's occasional and inconsistent qualifications reflect an anxiety about designating as Plato's doctrine certain select propositions that occur at discrete moments in extended conversations between Socrates and various and sundry interlocutors.

This question about the proper way to read a Platonic dialogue is not idle pedantry. What is at stake, in fact, is an alternative and perhaps more fruitful understanding of metaphysics. Metaphysical speculation in Plato's Euthyphro occurs in a context that suggests the complexity and the elusiveness of the very thing that Socrates and Euthyphro seek, which is the definition of piety. In the marketplace in front of the law courts, where he has come to tend to the indictment brought against him for impiety and corrupting the young, Socrates happens to meet Euthyphro, a young man flush with pious zeal on his way to initiate a lawsuit against his father, who, under exceedingly extenuating circumstances, has brought about the death of a drunken laborer. When Socrates questions the propriety of proceeding against one's father, Euthyphro rebukes him, asserting that the only relevant question is whether the killer has acted justly. Euthyphro concedes that well- established practice requires that charges of murder be brought by members of the victim's family, and that most people will regard prosecution of one's father on behalf of a hired hand as the height of impiety, but he insists that he understands the will of the gods more plainly and precisely than most.

It is this presumption that Socrates questions in the dialogue, and defeats. First, he shows Euthyphro that it is difficult to infer what the gods think about justice, for careful attention to tradition reveals that the gods quarrel bitterly about the just, the noble and the good. Then he argues that these quarrels raise the question of which of the different and conflicting things that the gods hold dear is truly just, and thereby he seeks to show Euthyphro that the question of justice is more fundamental than that of what the gods hold dear. Finally, having gotten Euthyphro to agree that piety is a part of justice, while having demonstrated how hard it is to make headway in ascertaining precisely in what justice consists, Socrates leaves Euthyphro deprived of his presumption to know plainly the will of the gods and altogether too humbled and distracted to persist with the suit against his father.

You could say that the moral of Plato's text is rather conservative: one should respect law and follow custom because thinking for oneself leads to unnatural and immoral conduct. Or, with equal plausibility, one could learn a liberal lesson: religious fanaticism must be tamed by showing those who presume to know divine will that religious traditions are self-contradictory, and that reason supplies human beings with all the knowledge they need to live a moral life. Yet there is more to be said and learned. Like Leibniz, Plato thinks that the question of how the divine is disposed toward human beings is a question of the first importance; but, whereas Leibniz's universal jurisprudence presupposes that reason can

derive or demonstrate the principles of justice and divine caring, the Platonic dialogues together suggest the profound problems that inhere in the attempt to determine in what divine caring and the just by nature consists.

For Leibniz, and for Riley, Platonism stands for the affirmation of the existence of "eternal moral verities." In reducing Platonism to a doctrine, they scant one of Socrates's most provocative and persistent claims: that his peculiar wisdom --- a "human wisdom" as he calls it in the Apology --- consists in a knowledge of what he does not know. Socrates's human wisdom is a form of skepticism, because it argues that we lack complete and satisfactory knowledge of the most important things. But it is no ordinary skepticism, because it shows that the knowledge we lack is the most important knowledge. For this reason, Socrates makes the need for metaphysics, and the lack of metaphysics, central to the philosophical analysis of morality and politics.

Skepticism is the Socratic tribute to metaphysics. Metaphysical speculation is not the foundation or ground of Platonic political philosophy, as Leibniz and Riley (and not a few others) would have it. It is, rather, the culmination of an arduous ascent, an ascent that, as Socrates suggests in the Theatetus, begins in wonder; and it is led upward through an examination of the complex intimations embedded in common opinions and ordinary desires. Such a view of metaphysical speculation does not provide direct and unambiguous support for justice understood as universal benevolence (or for any other conception of justice). Still, in an age in which dogmatic slumberers have taken to sleepwalking in broad daylight and boasting of their wakefulness in the public square, at a time in which the leading lights condescend to the philosophy of the past while presiding over the reduction of the philosophy of the future to an enumeration of their own likes and dislikes, a bit of Socratic skepticism can win for the mind some valuable room for maneuver.

Metaphysics grows out of the desire to understand. Like all good things, it is easier to mock and to misuse than to respect and to use well. Many arts and sciences --- indeed, most forms of inquiry --- can proceed quite nicely and solve a host of problems before coming up against the questions of metaphysics. About this, there can be no doubt. The problem is that the impulse to metaphysics cannot be postponed or squashed without abolishing the mystery in man. As Patrick Riley demonstrates, Leibniz's difficulties are not only more pleasant than the complacencies served up by contemporary thought, they are also more useful, since they remind us of our incompleteness and shed light on what making ourselves whole (and really intelligent) would require.

The great mistake is to suppose that if Leibniz failed to reconcile freedom and divine determination, or to show how evil can exist in a world created by a good and all-knowing God, or to derive a universal jurisprudence from rationally established first principles, then his philosophy was a failure and holds no more than antiquarian interest. Nor is it sufficient to honor Leibniz for the moral uplift that his philosophy can provide in a weightless and self-regarding age. Leibniz's philosophy commands our attention because it clarifies the claims

that the conception of a divinely ordered universe has on human beings. It does not provide a solution to our problems, but it performs the valuable service of casting light on the problems posed by the solutions that we favor.

The professors who smugly fancy themselves to have transcended metaphysics, who are sure that God and an enduring rational order have no place in serious thinking, are the true Panglossians. They denounce those who claim to know the true character of the world, and then make the same claim for themselves. Their remedies constrict the heart and bind the intellect. But the problem of freedom, the challenge of evil and the question of God will not go away just because they turn their backs on them. They claim to speak for ordinary people, but they do not respect them sufficiently to acknowledge that ordinary people are bothered by evil, drawn to justice and keen to make sense of the conflict between them. Theodicy is not only an activity of believers or aristocratic rationalists. The search for essences is more common, and therefore more "pragmatic" than the enemies of essences allow.

The impulse to undertake the metaphysical journey is awakened by the perplexities in ordinary language and spurred onward by the wonders presented by ordinary life. To be sure, poets of all ages have warned of the dangers of philosophical flight: getting lost in the clouds, suffering dizziness and nausea from the rarefied air, approaching too near to the sun. And wise students of politics ancient and modern have cautioned against the disasters that await cities and states that put their trust in inferences drawn from abstract speculation. And they are right. Metaphysics does not move mountains, and it will not save the world. It cannot cure the common cold or put bread on the table. But those are not all the things that a human life demands.

Peter Berkowitz teaches government at Harvard University and is the author of Nietzsche: The Ethics of an Immoralist (Harvard University Press).