

Patrick Riley's Leibniz

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Abstract

This essay clarifies Patrick Riley's account of G. W. Leibniz by placing Leibniz's moral and political doctrines in historical perspective. By understanding Leibniz's practical philosophy as a solution to the same problems confronted by Thomas Hobbes, one can appreciate the originality and appeal of Riley's Leibniz — with its emphasis on benevolence and Platonic ideas. By drawing attention to Leibniz's practical works, Riley has resurrected an important voice in the history of political thought that had been long neglected. The essay concludes with some personal remarks about Riley's own Leibnizian charity.

Broadly speaking, prior to Patrick Riley, Leibniz was known to contemporary philosophers in one of two contexts. In the first, he was the model for Voltaire's infamous Doctor Pangloss from *Candide*, who embraces Leibniz's popular doctrine that "if there were not the best [*optimum*] among all possible worlds, God would not have produced any."¹ Voltaire endlessly amused himself by mocking this doctrine repeatedly throughout the course of his tale, rendering the thinly-veiled philosopher from Hanover little more than a punch line. Shortly after affirming that the Lisbon earthquake of 1755 confirmed the doctrine of optimism, Voltaire subjects Pangloss to public humiliation and a hanging — which, no doubt, Voltaire found agreeable with the best of all possible worlds.

The second "popular" Leibniz was Bertrand Russell's rigorous logical philosopher. Russell had championed Leibniz as "one of the supreme intellects of all time" for his "profound, coherent, largely Spinozistic, and amazingly logical" philosophy.² It was this Leibniz who was to serve as inspiration to the early twentieth-century analytic philosophers, insofar as he worked from simple logical axioms, such as the laws of contradiction and sufficient reason to analyze fundamental philosophical problems and employed "logic as a key to metaphysics."³ Yet at the same time Russell largely accepted Voltaire's verdict on Leibniz's practical philosophy, concluding the best parts of his works "are the most abstract, and the worst those which most nearly concern human life."⁴ For all Russell did to resurrect Leibniz, his labors confirmed Leibniz's reputation as a trifling moral and political thinker, who was only of significant interest to a fairly small corner of academic philosophers.

It was into this void that Patrick Riley began his efforts to resurrect the practical Leibniz in the early 1970s with his edited volume of political writings, the first-ever such collection of Leibniz essays available in English. He subsequently worked to synthesize these essays into a coherent political theory in his *Leibniz' Universal Jurisprudence* (1996). And not least of all, he has continued to develop his thoughts on Leibniz's practical philosophy in a series of essays and book reviews mostly found in the *Leibniz Review* over the past two decades.

I. Placing Riley's Leibniz in Historical Context

In order to appreciate Riley's Leibniz, it is necessary to place Leibniz in his proper historical context. Leibniz writes some two hundred years after Luther had nailed his 95 theses to the door of Castle Church in Wittenberg. Although Luther could not have appreciated the far-reaching effects his actions would have, he would indeed transform all of Europe – and not uniformly for the better. The most immediately unnerving consequence was the fragmenting of political societies. Luther's deeds represented a bold public challenge to authority in an age that depended on the unquestioned status of those very authorities. Luther's claim, "A Christian is a perfectly free lord of all, subject to none,"⁵ challenged political authorities in Swabia, the Rhineland, Saxony, and Franconia. It also gave rise to the very concept of "Sovereign Individuals," whose private interests would trump any considerations of the public good. These forces would combine for over a hundred years of war between and within states throughout Western Europe.

The first thoroughly modern solution to this modern predicament came from Thomas Hobbes, who was himself born during the threat of international war and wrote throughout the English Civil War. Hobbes took such conflict to be part of the natural order and accepted bald individualism as a fundamental premise of his political philosophy in the form of psychological egoism. Any solution to the problem of political conflict would have to be grounded in the egoism that fueled that very tendency to conflict in the first place. Hobbes would ultimately erect a fearsome Leviathan, who would unify individual subjects with their shared fear of death. In doing so, he abandoned all appeals to abstract metaphysics and traditional conceptions of natural law grounded in immaterial substance. This gave birth to the doctrine of legal positivism, where Hobbes would separate legal questions from moral ones.⁶ It was the command of the fearsome sovereign that counted more so than the moral claims of those commands. Hobbes knew that this solution would

be unappealing to some, but argued that the “estate of man can never be without some incommodity or other, and that the greatest that in any form of government can possibly happen to the people in general is scarce sensible in respect of the miseries and horrible calamities that accompany a civil war or that dissolute condition of masterless men without subjection to laws and a coercive power to tie their hands from rapine and revenge.”⁷ In other words, you might be miserable under a Leviathan, but count your lucky stars that you have one.

II. Riley’s Leibniz as a Solution to the Problems of Modernity

Among those profoundly dissatisfied with Hobbes’s solution to the problems of factionalization and the sovereign individual was Riley’s Leibniz. This Leibniz perceived the same problems that Hobbes did, acknowledging that in modernity one would be right “to take proper precautions” against perpetual war.⁸ But he differed fundamentally on what those precautions might be. Specifically, his precautions would deny both elements of the Hobbesian project. First, he would reject Hobbes’s reliance on the egoistic sovereign individuals and their shared fear of violent death as a means of bonding subjects. Second, he would insist on a political standard above the commands of the Leviathan for ultimate appeals on matters of justice. The combined forces of these doctrines would result in what Riley has termed, “justice as the charity of the wise.”

Leibniz’s commitment to charity stands in stark contrast to Hobbes’s moral psychology. Whereas Hobbes’s egoism largely rules out the very possibility, positing, “the object” of every individual’s voluntary act “is some *good to himself*,”⁹ Leibniz insists that justice requires charity, which is “the habit of rejoicing in the happiness of another. . . . [Of] converting the happiness of another into one’s own,” independent of “hope, fear, and of regard for any question of utility.”¹⁰ As Riley is quick to note, this principle of charity is distinctively Christian, citing Leibniz’s sources as being Augustine and ultimately the Gospel of John, which reformulates the old law to read, “That ye love one another; as I have loved you, that ye also love one another. But this shall all men know that yet are my disciples, if ye have love one to another.”¹¹ To love others, to embrace their happiness as one’s own, is to fulfill God’s commandments. Indeed, for Leibniz, to truly know God is to follow this commandment: “one cannot know God without loving one’s brother, . . . one cannot have wisdom without having charity.”¹²

At the same time, Leibniz fuses this Christian conception of charity with Platonism. As Riley often notes, he was a “demi-Platonic believer in uncreated eternal verities.”¹³ In his *Meditation on the Common Concept of Justice*, Leibniz takes up Plato’s *Euthyphro* question for his own purposes. He opens the essay by acknowledging that God wills justice. But he continues by asking, “whether it is good and just because God wills it or whether God wills it because it is good and just”? He reformulates his own question to make his purposes in asking this question perfectly explicit: are “justice and goodness arbitrary or [do] they belong to the necessary and eternal truths about the nature of things, as do numbers and propositions”?¹⁴ Leibniz’s answer to this question is crystal clear. To adopt the proposition that any individual agent – *including God!* – is just by its own declaration is “properly the motto of a tyrant.”¹⁵ God is just insofar as he conforms his behavior to the eternal idea of justice.

This Christian-Platonic conception of justice as benevolence or charity offers a striking contrast with Hobbesian egoism on two fronts. On the first front, Leibniz forthrightly rejects the Hobbesian doctrine of legal positivism. Perhaps the most terrifying conclusion from Hobbes’s political philosophy was its perceived utter arbitrariness.¹⁶ Hobbes had defined justice as nothing more or less than the fulfillment of contract.¹⁷ Since parties are capable of agreeing to virtually anything, this leaves the substantive content of justice almost perfectly arbitrary. There are yet two further complications. First, since the Leviathan does not contract with the people – since it is merely the recipient of their collected natural rights – it is completely free from being evaluated by an independent standard of justice. Second, since the people have contracted with one another to obey the sovereign, they are bound by the very definition of justice to follow its commands, regardless of its content. By locating justice outside the realm of convention or agreement, Leibniz seeks to put an end to “[a]rbitrary power,” which “is directly opposed to the empire of reason.”¹⁸ As such, he insists that sovereign power must necessarily remain subject to reasoned scrutiny from the vantage point of the eternal idea of justice. This facilitates the possibility, among other things, that although Christianity generally counsels obedience to political laws, “It is true that there can be exceptions.”¹⁹ It further means that there can be “just limits to ecclesiastical and secular power.”²⁰ This is only possible for Leibniz insofar as there is this higher Platonic standard.

On the second front, Leibniz’s doctrine of justice as charity offers a considerably softer and, in obvious ways, more appealing mode of political life. Hobbes is explicit in his reliance individual fear. It is the inspiration for political society:

“The origin of large and lasting societies lay not in mutual human love but in men’s mutual fear.”²¹ It is also the primary motivation for obeying sovereign commands and hence remaining orderly: “Of all the passions, that which inclineth men least to break the laws is fear.”²² So at every stage of human interaction, individuals are motivated most fundamentally by fear of their fellows and fear of the government. While Hobbes’s account may be effective in certain respects, it lacks curbside appeal. Further, it may not be as effective as advertised. As even Leibniz’s sometimes foe, Spinoza, acknowledges, “Harmony is . . . commonly produced by fear, but then it is untrustworthy.”²³ This is the great insight of the Continental critiques of Hobbes, and it is the foundation of the appeal of Leibniz’s reliance on charity and benevolence. Those who are primarily motivated by fear will only behave sociably insofar as they are under the eyes of the relevant authorities. When those eyes are diverted, they have no incentives to be sociable. All the incentives present in the Hobbesian state of nature return in full force, as if they wore the Ring of Gyges. The only remaining Hobbesian solution is to step up its surveillance and operate at a fairly invasive level.

By contrast, Leibniz’s appeals to charity and benevolence do not rely in the same way on this surveillance. He instead seeks to change the moral psychology of citizens so that they might be freed from mutual fear and fear of the state – and hence enjoy a kind of freedom inconceivable in a Hobbesian state. This moral psychology is well-captured in his *Opinion on the Principles of Pufendorf*:

[H]e who acts well *not out of hope or fear* but by an inclination of his soul is so far from not behaving justly that, on the contrary, he acts more justly than all others, imitating, in a certain way, as a man, divine justice. Whoever, indeed, does good out of love for God and for his neighbor takes pleasure precisely in the action itself (such being the nature of love) and *does not need any other incitement or the command of a superior*.²⁴

Perfect Leibnizian citizens thus operate in a very different world from Hobbes’s. By setting aside their particular and selfish interests and adopting the welfare of their fellow citizens as their animating principle, they are largely freed from the heavy hand of the state. The number of laws can be reduced. The anxiety that Hobbesian citizens feel when locking their doors at night is largely absent. They sleep peacefully each night, free from worries about the machinations of their fellow citizens and from a haunting guilty conscience.

Riley’s Leibniz thus offers a uniquely valuable solution to the problem of Luther’s sovereign individual. Whereas Hobbes channels the individual fears associated

with the increasing fragmentation of society into the arms of an unaccountable, unconstrained, and arbitrary sovereign subject to no limits other than its own imagination, Leibniz seeks to redirect that love on to fellow citizens under a sovereign constrained by the eternal idea of justice. One might reasonably doubt whether or not such a theory is doomed by its quixotic ambitions for human nature itself. Yet as Riley so gently reminds us,

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.²⁵

III. Personal Anecdotes

The “charity of the wise” is not merely an object of Patrick Riley’s scholarly curiosity – it is a way of life. Patrick is among the most generous souls one could ever encounter in academia. I first contacted Patrick – then in Madison, WI – in 2001, when I blindly mailed him a draft of a Rousseau paper from my home campus one hundred miles to his north. I had never published a word on Rousseau, much less on anything, and I had no right to hear anything back from the man who had just edited the *Cambridge Companion to Rousseau*. Yet within a few hours, I received a fax in return. It read,

Dear Colleague, Your nice letter reaches me just as I am setting out for Boston (my home) and then Oxford and Paris (Oakeshott commemorative lectures). I’ll be back in Madison January 21, 2002 – call me and we’ll get together in Madison! (In the meantime I’ll read your Rousseau-paper.) Merry Christmas! Very best wishes – Patrick R.

Readers who know Patrick well will recognize every element of this message. One finds here a trace of his intellectual lineage (Oakeshott), his penchant for European travel, his comfort with a difficult commute, and his generally inexplicable preference for communicating by fax. But most of all, one finds his remarkable charity. Patrick indeed treated me to dinner that January. At that dinner, he persuaded me that I had not merely a conference paper on my hands, but rather a book. And he took it as a personal responsibility to see to it that my book would be written and published – all for someone to whom he owed absolutely nothing in this world,

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especially on the Hobbesian view. It was his Leibnizian spirit of charity that drove him to promote my happiness. And for this reason, I will forever be a grateful champion both of Riley and Leibniz.

Before wrapping up these thoughts on Riley, it would also be appropriate to mention one further anecdote. While I was writing my Rousseau book, I spent a year at the University of Wisconsin—Madison, where Patrick taught for some thirty plus years. Madison was – and indeed remains – an exciting city, especially for those of us who have lived for years in rural Wisconsin. So I would often invite my friends to come visit. One such friend, a philosopher of science, accepted this invitation. As I was giving him a tour of the Madison campus, we strolled through the famous Rathskeller of the historical Memorial Union. From the bowels of the cavernous dining hall, we heard a voice calling us. It was Patrick, who was inviting us to join him. As we approached, we saw him enjoying a chicken dinner, like many of the students there. But instead of entertaining himself with a laptop or *The Onion*, Patrick was reading the *Leibniz Review*! Patrick would have it no other way. It was only appropriate to read about Teutonic philosophers in something called a “Rathskeller,” and he wouldn’t be caught with anything else.

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Notes

¹ G. W. Leibniz, *Theodicy* (La Salle, IL: Open Court, 1985), 128, §8.

² Bertrand Russell, *A History of Western Philosophy* (New York: Simon and Schuster, [1945] 1972), 581.

³ Russell [1945] 1972, 595.

⁴ Bertrand Russell, *The Philosophy of Leibniz* (London: Routledge, [1900] 1992), 202.

⁵ Martin Luther, “The Freedom of a Christian,” in *Martin Luther: Selections from His Writings* (New York: Anchor Books, [1520] 1958), 53.

⁶ See *Leviathan*, 26.2, 30.20.

⁷ *Leviathan*, 18.20.

⁸ G. W. Leibniz, *Codex Iuris Gentium (Praefatio)*, in *Leibniz: Political Writings*, ed., Patrick Riley (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, [1693] 1972), 166.

⁹ *Leviathan*, 14.8.

¹⁰ G. W. Leibniz, *Codex Iuris Gentium (Praefatio)*, in *Leibniz: Political Writings*, ed., Patrick Riley (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, [1693] 1972), 171.

¹¹ John 13:4. See Riley's *Leibniz: Universal Jurisprudence: Justice as the Charity of the Wise* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1996), 142-43.

¹² G. W. Leibniz, *Felicity*, in *Leibniz: Political Writings*, ed., Patrick Riley (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, [1694-98?] 1972), 84.

¹³ Riley 1996, 131; see also 2, 10, 19, 31, 92, 112, 115, 154, 162, 214, 267, 269, 272, and 302.

¹⁴ G. W. Leibniz, *Meditation on the Common Concept of Justice* in *Leibniz: Political Writings*, ed., Patrick Riley (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, [1702-03] 1972), 45.

¹⁵ *Meditation*, 46.

¹⁶ It should be noted that this Leibnizian reading of Hobbes has been sternly challenged recently in the work of A. P. Martinich, especially *The Two Gods of Leviathan: Thomas Hobbes on Religion and Politics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992), 112-34.

¹⁷ *Leviathan*, 14.2.

¹⁸ G. W. Leibniz, *Excerpts from Letters to Landgraf Ernst of Hesse-Rheinfels, Bossuet, and Thomas Burnett* in *Leibniz: Political Writings*, ed., Patrick Riley (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, [1694-98?] 1972), 193.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 185.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 187.

²¹ Thomas Hobbes, *On the Citizen*, ed., Richard Tuck and Michael Silverthorne (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, [1641] 1998), 1.2.

²² *Leviathan*, 17.13.

²³ Spinoza, *The Ethics*, in *Spinoza: Complete Works*, ed., Michael Morgan (Indianapolis, IN: Hackett Publishing, 2002), 350 [4.A.16].

²⁴ G. W. Leibniz, *Opinion on the Principles of Pufendorf*, in *Leibniz: Political Writings*, ed., Patrick Riley (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, [1694-98?] 1972), 72, emphases added.

²⁵ Riley 1996, 274-75.