

**Comments on “Leibniz and Pantheism” by Robert Adams for The Twelfth Annual
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Professor Adams’s paper on Leibniz and pantheism is characteristic of his work in general: historical and philosophical, erudite and provocative, and, for a commentator, above all, intimidating. I could easily spend my twenty minutes expanding on my admiration for Adams and his paper, but that’s not my task for today. So instead I’ll try to prepare the way for what I’m sure will be a great discussion by saying a bit about the possible connections Adams sees between Leibniz’s philosophy and pantheism, and by framing a few worries for would-be pantheists.

There has been some debate in the literature over whether or not Leibniz inclined towards pantheism as an ambitious young man arriving in Paris from the intellectual backwaters of Germany. But that is not Adams’s concern in this essay. Rather his interest is in the question of whether or not pantheism is in some sense implicit in Leibniz’s philosophy, if it is, as Adams nicely puts it, “in its destiny.” As difficult as the more familiar historical question may be, Adams’s question is, I think, even harder. It turns not only on how one interprets the relevant historical texts and Leibniz’s philosophy but also the elusive rules of philosophical destiny. Confronting such a question, one might reasonably be diffident. But let’s instead be bold. Let’s ask why one might think that Leibniz’s philosophy contains, what is for him, unwanted seeds of pantheism.

One reason for thinking that pantheism is loaded in Leibniz’s philosophy is to be found in his alleged idealism. I think that anyone who accepts the existence of a traditional creating god will have to accept a fairly brute view of creation itself. God has ideas and creates by bringing into existence creatures corresponding to, but distinct from, those ideas. Ardent proponents of the PSR might already find cause to worry here, but things might look especially problematic where idealism is involved. For suppose that, in the beginning, all that exists are God and ideas. What more, for the idealist, might creation bring forth, and what would be the point? Would creation involve duplicating divine ideas? Would creation, so understood, be worth the trouble? I take it that these are the sorts of concerns that Adams is getting at when he suggests that Lessing’s worry about what existence could add to possibility is “particularly apt as a question for a Leibnizian metaphysical idealism that takes

the intrinsic, non-dispositional properties of all the most fundamental things to be perceptual states,” and when he quotes, with approval, Russell’s quip that “One wonders what change is made when [Leibniz’s] God ‘makes his thought’” effective.”

Depending on how one fills in the details, these may indeed be apt worries for idealists, but I don’t think they are an immediate concern for Leibniz because I don’t think that Leibniz is best read as an idealist. Pedantically, I think he is best viewed as a reductive, non-eliminative, mentalist. Less pedantically, I think he can be seen as a kind of unorthodox atomist, someone who shares the atomist’s (not the Adamist’s!) intuition that everything must ultimately be grounded in true unities, but who thinks that nothing extended, and hence nothing material, could serve as those true unities. Leibniz’s atoms are mental and have perceptions, but, importantly, they also have appetites. Leibniz’s monads are loci of activity, the intelligible grounds of physical forces. In creating, Leibniz’s God therefore doesn’t simply duplicate ideas, he realizes dynamic, striving substances. Adams nicely points out that activity is not sufficient to refute pantheism. The pantheist may maintain that parts of God are active. Fair enough, but I think Leibniz’s thought is that activity is a necessary, not a sufficient, condition for creaturely independence.

Thinking of monads as loci of forces, however, invites a second reason for thinking that pantheism is loaded in Leibniz’s philosophy. For it invites the question of how, for Leibniz, we are to understand the relationship between secondary and primary causes, between creaturely and divine activity. And here I think we encounter a deep tension in traditional views. For, on the one hand, tradition holds – contra the pantheist – that created things are in some sense independent and distinct from God. God creates things that are not God, indeed, that are in some sense “apart” or “external” to God. Call this commitment “Independence.” On the other hand, however, tradition also emphasizes the dependence of created things on God. According to tradition, nothing is wholly independent of God, and, creatures, as the bible has it, live and move and have their being “in him” (Acts 17:28). Call this commitment “Dependence.”

Like the scholastics before him, Leibniz hoped to strike a delicate balance between Independence and Dependence, in part, by carefully working out doctrines of divine conservation and divine concurrence. Like his predecessors, Leibniz understands divine conservation to be a continuous creation. By this he means that creation and conservation should be understood as different aspects of a single continuous act, the word “creation” connoting the beginning of that act, the word “conservation” connoting the continuation of the same act. Malebranche would later pervert this doctrine to his own ends by suggesting

that conservation is a continuous re-creation, but that is no part of Leibniz's view nor is it a part of the views of his predecessors.

Does the doctrine of divine conservation undermine the independence of creatures? Not obviously I think. Consider by way of analogy a freezer with an ice maker. The freezer might be held to create and conserve ice cubes. And, indeed, it might be thought to create and conserve ice cubes through a single continuous act with the word "create" connoting the beginning of that act, and the word "conserve" connoting the continuation of the same act. Nonetheless, we have, I assume, no strong inclination to think that ice cubes are thereby shown to be parts or modes of the freezer. Rather they are dependent on, but ontologically distinct from, the freezer itself. Leibniz's commitment to divine conservation seems to me to be similarly consistent with the thought that we are dependent on, but ontologically distinct from, God. Put conversely, Leibniz's commitment to divine conservation doesn't seem to me to commit him to the view that created substances are merely parts or modes of God as the pantheist suggests.

Leibniz, again like his scholastic predecessors, also accepted the doctrine of divine concurrence. Painting in broad strokes, the doctrine of divine concurrence maintains that secondary causes cannot bring about their ordinary effects without God's direct causal assistance, without, that is, God's concurrence. This doctrine makes, and was intended to make, creatures still more dependent upon God. Does it undermine creaturely independence? Again, I think, not obviously. In a letter of [2 February] 1706 to Bartholomew Des Bosses, Leibniz affirms his commitment to the doctrine of divine concurrence and argues that it does not necessarily undermine creaturely activity:

I myself recognize God's concurrence to be so necessary that, whatever creaturely power is assumed, no action would follow if God were to withdraw his concurrence. ... Nevertheless, I do not see how it follows from this that power is reduced to a faculty, for I maintain that in an active power there is a certain exigency (as your schools say) for action ... albeit an exigency that can be resisted, which is grounded in the laws of nature established through divine wisdom, and this exigency is not present in a bare faculty. From active force ... or entelechy, there follows action, provided only that the ordinary concurrence of God is added; but from a faculty, even assuming the concurrence that is required for a power, action will not follow. And so, God's concurrence, which is necessary for the action of a creature and sufficient for a power, is not sufficient for a faculty, since the power itself was already established through some prior concurrence of God, which is not the case with a

bare faculty. (LDB 11)

Although Leibniz's terminology here is a bit sloppy (in part because he is following the language used by Des Bosses), his argument is, I think, essentially right. The doctrine of divine concurrence increases the dependence of creatures upon God by making their causal activity beholden to divine assistance. But there is still a significant difference between assisting an active power and simply doing all the work absent that active power. Leibniz's commitment to divine concurrence, like his commitment to divine conservation, I submit, does not commit him to the view that created substances are merely parts or modes of God.

In highlighting ways in which Leibniz sought to strike a balance between traditional commitments to both Dependence and Independence, I don't mean to suggest that there isn't an easier way to respond. For one might, of course, simply abandon either Dependence or Independence. Atheists, for example, needn't strike a delicate balance between creatures being dependent and yet not-too-dependent upon God. The atheist may uphold Independence at the cost of Dependence. Pantheists similarly don't need to strike a delicate balance. The pantheist may uphold Dependence at the cost of Independence. After all the honest toil of the traditionalists, the atheist's and pantheist's solutions might seem like theft. Before passing judgment, however, we should ask, as Adams does on behalf of the pantheist, if there is indeed any reason not to prefer theft to honest toil in this case? I confess I don't have very strong convictions myself about what the theist should say here, but as a gateway to discussion, let me raise three concerns for the would-be pantheist.

The first concern is mostly theological. It was nicely articulated to me by Sam Newlands in private conversation, and I quote in full, "But it's heresy!" Or at least it certainly sounds like heresy. Those interested in how far pantheism diverges from traditional religious belief should want to know more about what exactly pantheism entails. If pantheism is simply the view that creatures are dependent upon God, almost all traditionalists should already be reckoned pantheists. If pantheism is the view that there is a sense – perhaps even a spatial sense – in which all creatures are in God, then, again, I suspect that most theists have been pantheists all along. If pantheism is the view that creatures are parts of God, we should want to know what it means to be a part of God. If it means that creatures belong to an unequal community that includes God, then again, I think that traditional theists should be happy to call themselves pantheists. If, however, it means that creatures are parts of God in the way that my hand is a part of my body, or bricks are parts of a schoolhouse, traditional theists might have good reason for seeing pantheism as anathema to their understanding of God.

The second concern is a mix of theology and philosophy. One reason for theists to insist that creatures are independent of God arises from the problem of evil. A natural line of thought holds that, although evil exists in this world, it is the fault of creatures rather than of God. Leibniz held that if creatures were not sufficiently independent of God – that if they were say modes or mere occasional causes – then such a response to the problem of evil would be undermined. Adams nicely points out that a distinction between our absolute wills and God’s absolute will “is not obviously inconsistent with supposing that we are somehow in God, or even parts of God.” He notes that in some cases we might think that a part of a whole has a will, or is responsible, for something for which the whole does not have a will or is not responsible. I may be a member of a university, a part if you like, but that doesn’t mean that I have a will for everything for which my university has a will, nor that I am responsible for everything for which my university is responsible. But we should be careful here. For in other cases it is not so easy to drive a wedge between the will or responsibility of a part and its whole. If my hand knocks over your wine glass, I won’t get very far trying to blame my hand but not myself, that is, not the whole of which my hand is a part. Here again the question of what exactly pantheism entails seems to me to loom large. Different versions of pantheism should be expected to offer more or less resources for responding to the problem of evil.

The third concern is mostly philosophical. Leibniz thought it important, as might we, to insist that there are some possibilities that don’t exist. If pantheism is motivated by eschewing the distinction between what God thinks and what God creates, then pantheism will put mere possibilities in danger. That is to say, it will advance the threat of necessitarianism that Leibniz, quite rightly in my opinion, associated with Spinoza’s philosophy. I say, however, only that it raises the threat, not that pantheism entails necessitarianism. For pantheism per se doesn’t rule out a distinction between mere possibilities and more robust actualities. One could imagine, for example, a primitive distinction within God between abstract natures and concrete natures, or one could entertain an indexical or causal theory of actuality, etc. Some such moves may run counter to the rationalist tendencies that might be thought to motivate pantheism to begin with, but here again it seems to me that much will turn on how exactly the pantheist’s commitments are spelled out. I suspect that the difficulties, although perhaps not the devils, may ultimately lie in the details.