

REFLECTIONS ON THE DOCTRINE OF A SINGLE UNIVERSAL SPIRIT

1702

This work, which returns to the theme of No. 53, On Nature Itself, was written at the summer palace, Lützenburg (later Charlottenburg), near Berlin. Like the preceding, it reflects the reply which Leibniz was engaged in preparing to Locke's Essay.

[G., VI, 529–38]

Some discerning people have believed and still believe today, that there is only one single spirit, which is universal and animates the whole universe and all its parts, each according to its structure and the organs which it finds there, just as the same wind current causes different organ pipes to give off different sounds. Thus they also hold that when an animal has sound organs, this spirit produces the effect of a particular soul in it but that when the organs are corrupted, this particular soul reduces to nothing or returns, so to speak, to the ocean of the universal spirit.

Aristotle has seemed to some to have had an opinion approaching this, which was later revived by Averroes, a celebrated Arabian philosopher. He believed that there is an *intellectus agens*, or active understanding, in us and also an *intellectus patiens*, or a passive understanding, and that the former, coming from without, is eternal and universal for all, while the passive understanding, being particular for each, disappears at man's death. This was the doctrine of certain Peripatetics two or three centuries ago, such as Pomponatius, Contarini, and others, and one recognizes traces of it in the late Mr. Naudé, as his letters and his recently printed *Naudaeana* show.¹ These men taught the doctrine in secret to their closest and ablest disciples; in public they were cautious enough to say that though the doctrine was indeed true according to philosophy – by which they meant pre-eminently that of Aristotle – it was false from the viewpoint of faith. This finally resulted in the disputes concerning the twofold truth, a doctrine condemned in the last Lateran Council.

I have been told that Queen Christina held a strong inclination toward this opinion, and since Mr. Naudé, her librarian, was saturated with it, it would seem that he gave her information about these secret opinions of famous philosophers, with whom he had discoursed in Italy. Spinoza, who recognizes only one single substance, is not far from the doctrine of a single universal spirit, and even the Neo-Cartesians, who hold that only God acts, affirm it, seemingly unawares. It would also seem that Molinos and certain other modern quietists, among them an author who calls himself John Angelus Silesius, who wrote before Molinos and some of whose writings have recently been reprinted, and even before these, Weigel, shared this opinion of a Sabbath or a repose of souls in God. It is for this reason that they believed that the cessation of particular activities is the highest state of perfection.²

It is true that the Peripatetic philosophers did not make this spirit completely universal, for besides the intelligences which they held animated the stars, they also assumed an intelligence for this lower world, holding that it is this intelligence which functions as active intellect in the souls of men. They were led to this doctrine of a universal immortal soul for all men by a fallacious argument. For they assumed that an actual infinite plurality is impossible and that it is therefore also impossible that there should be an infinite number of souls but that this would necessarily follow if particular souls were to subsist. For since it is their opinion that the world is eternal and the human race also, and since new souls are constantly being born, there would have to be an actual infinity by now if they were all to subsist.

They regarded this reasoning as a demonstration. But it is full of false assumptions. There are those who disagree with them on the impossibility of an actual infinite, on the eternity of the human race, and on the generation of new souls, since Platonists teach the pre-existence of souls and Pythagoreans teach metempsychosis, holding that there always remain a certain determined number of souls which pass through cycles.

In itself the doctrine of a universal spirit is good, for all who teach it recognize in fact the existence of divinity, whether they believe that this universal spirit is supreme – in which case they hold that it itself is God – or whether they believe, like the Cabalists, that God created it. The latter is also the opinion of the Englishman Henry More and other newer philosophers, particularly of certain chemists who believe that there is a universal *Archeus* or world-soul; some of them have maintained that this is the spirit of the Lord moving over the waters, of which the beginning of Genesis speaks.³

But to go so far as to say that this universal spirit is the only spirit and that there are no particular souls or spirits, or at least that these particular souls cease to subsist, is, I believe, to exceed the bounds of reason and to advance, without any basis, a doctrine of which we have not even a distinct concept. Let us examine briefly the apparent reasons upon which the attempt is made to support this doctrine which destroys the immortality of souls and degrades the human race, or rather, all living creatures, from the level on which they belong and which is commonly ascribed to them. For it seems to me that so important an opinion should be proved and that it is not enough merely to have an imaginary notion of it based in fact only upon a very lame comparison with the wind animating musical organs.

I have shown above that the supposed demonstration of the Peripatetics, who maintained that there is only one spirit common to all men, has no force but is supported entirely by false premises. Spinoza undertook to demonstrate that there is only one substance in the world, but his demonstrations are pitiful or unintelligible. And the Neo-Cartesians, who believe that only God acts, have hardly given a proof, not to mention that Father Malebranche seems to admit at least the internal action of particular spirits.

One of the most obvious arguments that have been urged against particular souls is the difficulty involved in their origin. The Scholastic philosophers held great disputes about the origin of forms, among which they included souls. Their opinions were sharply divided as to whether they were drawn forth from the potency of matter, like a figure worked out of marble [eduction], or whether there was a traduction of souls, so that a new soul is born from a preceding one as one fire is lighted from another, or whether souls had already pre-existed and merely made themselves known after

the generation of the body, or finally, whether souls were created by God whenever there was a new generation.

Those who denied particular souls believed that by doing so, they were escaping the whole difficulty, but they were really cutting the knot rather than untying it. There is no force at all in an argument which can be put as follows: There have been differing explanations of this doctrine; therefore, the whole doctrine is false. That is the way the skeptics reason, and, if it were acceptable, there would be almost nothing which one could not reject. Experiments in our own time lead us to believe that souls, and even animals, have always existed, although in minute size, and that generation is but a kind of augmentation. In this way all the difficulties connected with the generation of souls and forms disappear. We do not deny God the right to create new souls, however, or to give a higher degree of perfection to those already in nature. We are rather speaking only of what is ordinary in nature without entering into God's particular economy with respect to human souls, which may be privileged because they are infinitely above those of animals.

A factor which, in my opinion, has also contributed much to make intelligent men accept the doctrine of a single universal spirit is that the popular philosophers gave currency to a doctrine about separate souls and about soul functions separate from and independent of the body and its organs which they could not fully justify. They had a good reason in wanting to sustain the immortality of the soul as conforming to divine perfections and to true morality; but seeing that the organs observed in animals become disordered through death and are finally destroyed, they felt obliged to return to separate souls, that is, to believe that the soul subsists without any body yet does not cease having its thoughts and functions. The better to prove this, they tried to show that the soul already has thoughts in this life which are abstract and independent of material concepts. But those who rejected this separate state and independence as contrary to experience and to reason were thereby driven all the more to believe in the extinction of the individual soul and the conservation of the single universal spirit.

I have examined this matter carefully and have shown that there are in truth certain materials of thought or objects of the understanding in the soul which have not been furnished by the external senses, namely, the soul itself and its functions (*nihil est in intellectu quod non fuerit in sensu, nisi ipse intellectus*).⁴ Those who favor a universal spirit will readily assent to this, for they distinguish this spirit from matter. I find, however, that there is never any abstract thought which is not accompanied by some images or material traces, and I have established a perfect parallelism between what happens in the soul and what takes place in matter. I have shown that the soul with its functions is something distinct from matter but that it nevertheless is always accompanied by material organs and also that the soul's functions are always accompanied by organic functions which must correspond to them and that this relation is reciprocal and always will be.

As for the complete separation of soul and body, I can say nothing about the laws of grace, and about the ordinances of God in regard to human souls in particular, beyond what the Holy Scriptures say, since these are things which cannot be known by reason, being dependent on the revelation of God himself. Nevertheless, I see no reason, either religious or philosophical, which compels me to abandon the doctrine of the parallelism of soul and body and to admit a perfect separation. For why cannot the soul always retain a subtle body organized after its own manner, which could

even some day reassume the form of its visible body in the resurrection, since a glorified body is ascribed to the blessed, and since the ancient Fathers have ascribed a subtle body to angels?

Furthermore, this doctrine conforms with the order of nature established through experience, for the observations of very capable observers have convinced us that animals do not begin when they are popularly believed to begin and that seminal animals or living seeds have existed from the beginning of things.⁵ And both order and reason demand that what has existed since the beginning should no more have an end and that, since generation is thus merely the growth of a changed and developed animal, death will be nothing but the diminution of a changed and developed animal but that the animal itself will always remain throughout these transformations, just as the silkworm and the butterfly are one and the same animal. And it is appropriate to remark here that nature has this tact and goodness in revealing its secrets to us in small samples and thus making us infer the rest, everything being in correspondence and harmony. It is this which nature shows us in the transformation of caterpillars and other insects, for flies too come from worms, to help us grasp that there are transformations everywhere. Our experiments on insects have destroyed the popular notion that these animals are reproduced through nourishment, without propagation. Nature has likewise also given us, in birds, a sample of how all animals are generated by means of eggs, a fact which the new discoveries have now made us accept.

There are also microscopic observations which have shown that the butterfly is merely a development of the caterpillar, but especially that seeds already contain the formed plant or animal, although it still needs transformation and nourishment, or growth, to become an animal of the kind which our ordinary senses can observe. And since even the smallest insects reproduce by the propagation of their kind, one must conclude the same to be true for these little seminal animals, that is, that they themselves come from other still smaller seminal animals, and thus have originated only with the world. This agrees well with the Holy Scriptures, which suggest that there were seeds in the beginning.

In dreams and in unconsciousness nature has given us an example which should convince us that death is not a cessation of all functions but only a suspension of certain more noticeable ones. Elsewhere I have explained an important point whose neglect has led men the more easily to accept the opinion that the soul is mortal. It is that a large number of small perceptions which are equal and balanced among themselves, with nothing to give them relief or distinguish them from each other, are not noticed at all and cannot be remembered. But to conclude from this that the soul is without any function at all would be like the popular belief that there is a void or nothing at all wherever there is no noticeable matter or that the earth does not move because its movement, being uniform and without jerks, is unnoticeable. We have an infinity of little perceptions which we are incapable of distinguishing. A great stupefying roar, as, for example, the murmur of a large assemblage, is composed of all the little murmurs of individual persons which are not noticed at all but of which one must nevertheless have some sensation; otherwise one would not sense the whole. Thus when an animal is deprived of organs capable of giving it sufficiently distinct perceptions, it does not follow that the animal has left no smaller and more uniform perceptions or that it is deprived of all its organs and all its perceptions. Its organs are merely enveloped and reduced to a small volume, but the order of nature requires that every-

thing be developed again sometime and return to a noticeable state and that there be a definite well-regulated progression in its changes which helps to bring things to fruition and perfection. It seems that even Democritus noted this resuscitation of animals, for Plotinus ascribed a doctrine of resurrection to him.⁶

These considerations all show that not only particular souls but animals themselves subsist and that there is no reason for believing in a complete extinction of souls or even a complete destruction of the animal. As a result, therefore, there is no need to have recourse to a single universal spirit and to rob nature of its own particular and subsisting perfections; thus also failing in fact adequately to recognize its order and harmony. There are also many things in the doctrine of a single universal spirit which cannot be maintained and are involved in much greater difficulties than the common doctrine.

These are a few of them. One may see at once that the analogy of the wind which makes different pipes sound differently flatters the imagination but explains nothing or, rather, that it implies exactly the contrary. For this universal wind in the pipes is nothing but the sum of a number of individual winds. So each pipe is filled with its own air, which can even pass from one pipe into another, in a way which makes the analogy support, instead, particular souls and even the transmigration of souls from one body to another, as the air can change pipes.

Moreover, if one imagines the universal spirit to be like an ocean composed of an infinity of drops which become detached when they animate some particular organic body but are reunited to the ocean after the organs are destroyed, one again forms a materialistic and crude concept which does not fit the matter and is involved in the same difficulties as those of the wind. For since the ocean is an aggregate of drops, God would be an assemblage of all souls, almost in the same way that a swarm of bees is an assemblage of small animals. But this swarm is not in itself a true substance, and it is clear that on this basis the universal spirit would not in itself be a true being. Instead of saying, then, that God is the only spirit, we should have to say that he is nothing at all by himself and that there are in nature only the particular souls of which he is the aggregate.

Besides, the drops reunited to the ocean of universal spirit after the destruction of the organs would in fact be souls which were subsisting independently of matter. So we would fall back into the view which we sought to avoid, especially if these drops retain some trace of their preceding state or still have certain functions and could perhaps even acquire more sublime ones in this ocean of divinity or of the universal spirit. But if we mean that these souls reunited to God are without any other functions of their own, we fall into an opinion contrary to reason and to all sound philosophy, as if any subsisting being could ever reach a state in which it is without any function or impression whatever. For when one thing is joined to another, it does not cease to have its particular functions, but these joined to the functions of others result in the functions of the whole. The whole would have none if the parts had none.

Furthermore, I have shown elsewhere that each being preserves perfectly all the impressions which it has received, although these impressions may no longer be noticeable separately because they have been joined with others. Thus the soul, reunited with an ocean of souls, would always remain the particular soul which it had been separately.

This shows that it is more reasonable and in greater conformity with the habits of

nature to keep particular souls subsisting in animals themselves, and not outside of them in God, and so to conserve not merely the soul but also the animal, as I have explained above and elsewhere; thus particular souls would also remain on duty always, that is, they would retain the particular functions which belong to them and would contribute to the beauty and order of the universe, instead of being reduced to the Sabbath in God of the quietists, or to a state of idleness and uselessness. As for the beatific vision of blessed spirits, it is compatible with the functions of their glorified bodies, which will continue to be organic in their own manner.

If anyone tries to maintain, however, that there are no particular souls at all, not even now, while the functions of sensation and thought take place with the help of organs, he is refuted by our experience, which teaches, it seems to me, that we are in ourselves something particular which thinks, which perceives, and which wills, and that we are distinguished from another being who thinks and wills something else. Otherwise we fall into the opinion of Spinoza or some similar authors who hold that there is only one substance, God, who thinks, believes, and wills one thing in me, but who thinks, believes, and wills an entirely contrary thing in someone else, an opinion which Mr. Bayle has well held up to ridicule in certain passages of his *Dictionary*.⁷

To go further, if there is nothing in nature but the universal spirit and matter, we shall have to say that if it is not the universal spirit who believes and wills contrary things in different persons, it is matter which is different and acts differently. But if matter acts, of what good is the universal spirit? If matter is only a passive first principle or better, a purely passive being, how then attribute these actions to it? It is far more reasonable, then, to believe that besides God, who is the supreme active principle, there are numerous particular active beings, since there are numerous actions and passions which are particular and contrary and should not be ascribed to the same subject. And these active beings are none other than individual souls.

It is also known that there are degrees in all things. There is an infinity of degrees between motion of any kind whatever and perfect rest, between hardness and perfect fluidity without any resistance, between God and nothing. Thus there is likewise an infinity of degrees between an active being as great as it can be and pure passivity. It is unreasonable, therefore, to recognize only a single active being, that is, a universal spirit, and a single passive one, that is, matter.

We must consider also that matter is not something opposed to God but that it must rather be opposed to a limited active being, that is, to the soul or to the form. For God is the supreme being, opposed to nothingness; from him comes matter as well as forms, and the purely passive is something more than nothingness, since it is capable of something, whereas nothingness can have no attributes. So we must match each particular portion of matter with particular forms, that is to say, with the souls and spirits which correspond to it.

I do not wish to return here to a demonstrative argument which I have used elsewhere, which is drawn from the nature of unities or simple things, with which particular souls are included. This argument compels us, unavoidably, not merely to admit particular souls but also to affirm that they are immortal by their nature and as indestructible as the universe and what is more, that each soul is a mirror of the universe in its own way, without any interruption, and contains in its depths an order corresponding to that of the universe itself; and that the souls vary and represent in an infinite number of ways, all different and all true, and thus multiply the universe, so to speak, as often as

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THEODICY

Essays on the Goodness of God, the
Freedom of Man and the Origin of Evil

Edited with an Introduction by Austin Farrer,
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Translated by E.M. Huggard from C.J. Gerhardt's Edition of
the Collected Philosophical Works, 1875-90



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*Deum namque ire per omnes
Terrasque tractusque maris caelumque profundum;
Hinc pecudes, armenta, viros, genus omne ferarum,
Quemque sibi tennes nascentem arcessere vitas.
Scilicet huc reddi deinde ac resoluta referri.*

9. Plato's Soul of the World has been taken in this sense by some, but there is more indication that the Stoics succumbed to that universal soul which swallows all the rest. Those who are of this opinion might be called 'Monopsychites', since according to them there is in reality only one soul that subsists. M. Bernier observes that this is an opinion almost universally accepted amongst scholars in Persia and in the States of the Grand Mogul; it appears even that it has gained a footing with the Cabalists and with the mystics. A certain German of Swabian birth, converted to Judaism some years ago, who taught under the name Moses Germanus, having adopted the dogmas of Spinoza, believed that Spinoza revived the ancient Cabala of the Hebrews. And a learned man who confuted this proselyte Jew appears to be of the same opinion. It is known that Spinoza recognizes only substance in the world, whereof individual souls are but transient modifications. Valentin Weigel, Pastor of Zschopau in Saxony, a man of wit, even of excessive wit, although people would have it that he was a visionary, was perhaps to some extent of that opinion; as was also a man known as Johann Angelus Silesius, author of certain quite pleasing little devotional verses in German, in the form of epigrams, which have just been reprinted. In general, the mystics' doctrine of deification was liable to such a sinister interpretation. Gerson already has written opposing Ruysbroek, a mystical writer, whose intention was evidently good and whose expressions are excusable. But it would be better to write in a manner that has no need of excuses: although I confess that oft-times expressions which are extravagant, and as it were poetical, have greater force to move and to persuade than correct forms of statement.

10. The annihilation of all that belongs to us in our own right, carried to great lengths by the Quietists, might equally well be veiled irreligion in certain minds, as is related, for example, concerning the Quietism of Foë, originator of a great Chinese sect. After having preached his religion for forty years, when he felt death was

approaching, he declared to his disciples that he had hidden the truth from them under the veil of metaphors, and that all reduced itself to Nothingness, which he said was the first source of all things. That was still worse, so it would seem, than the opinion of the Averroists. Both of these doctrines are indefensible and even extravagant; nevertheless some moderns have made no difficulty about adopting this one and universal Soul that engulfs the rest. It has met with only too much applause amongst the so-called freethinkers, and M. de Preissac, a soldier and man of wit, who dabbled in philosophy, at one time aired it publicly in his discourses. The System of Pre-established Harmony is the one best qualified to cure this evil. For it shows that there are of necessity substances which are simple and without extension, scattered throughout all Nature; that these substances must subsist independently of every other except God; and that they are never wholly separated from organic body. Those who believe that souls capable of feeling but incapable of reason are mortal, or who maintain that none but reasoning souls can have feeling, offer a handle to the Monopsychites. For it will ever be difficult to persuade men that beasts feel nothing; and once the admission has been made that that which is capable of feeling can die, it is difficult to found upon reason a proof of the immortality of our souls.

11. I have made this short digression because it appeared to me seasonable at a time when there is only too much tendency to overthrow natural religion to its very foundations. I return then to the Averroists, who were persuaded that their dogma was proved conclusively in accordance with reason. As a result they declared that man's soul is, according to philosophy, mortal, while they protested their acquiescence in Christian theology, which declares the soul's immortality. But this distinction was held suspect, and this divorce between faith and reason was vehemently rejected by the prelates and the doctors of that time, and condemned in the last Lateran Council under Leo X. On that occasion also, scholars were urged to work for the removal of the difficulties that appeared to set theology and philosophy at variance. The doctrine of their incompatibility continued to hold its ground *incognito*. Pomponazzi was suspected of it, although he declared himself otherwise; and that very sect of the Averroists survived as a school. It is thought that Caesar Cremoninus, a philosopher famous in his time, was one

possible, and in such a way that they approach divinity as far as they can in their different degrees and give to the universe all the perfection of which it is capable.

Consequently, I cannot see any basis, either in reason or in appearance, for combating the doctrine of individual souls. Those who do it agree that what is in us is an effect of the universal spirit. But the effects of God have subsistence, not to say that even the modifications and effects of created beings have permanence in some way and that their impressions are merely joined together without destroying each other. If therefore, as we have seen, it is in conformity with both reason and experience for the animal to subsist always, with its more or less distinct perceptions and with certain organs, and if, as a result, this effect of God always subsists in these organs, why should it not be permissible to call this the soul and to say that this effect of God is an immaterial and immortal soul which in some way imitates the universal spirit? Especially since this doctrine puts an end to all difficulties, as I have made fully clear in what I have said here and in other writings dealing with these matters?

REFERENCES

¹ Leibniz's easy identification of the differing positions of these men is inexact. Pomponazzi (*De immortalitate animae* [1516]) explicitly rejected the Averroistic doctrine of a single active intellect, and Cardinal Contarini (*De immortalitate animae, adversus Petrum Pomponatium* [1518]) rejected both Averroist and Alexandrist versions, as did the church in the Lateran Council on December 19, 1512, as Leibniz later points out. Cassirer (BC., II, 49, n. 314) cites Sponde, *Annales ecclesiae*, as the source of Leibniz's error. The *Naudaeana* of the French bibliographer and librarian of Queen Christine of Sweden, Gabriel Naudé (1600–1653), had appeared in 1701.

² On the quietists, Valentine Weigel, and Angelus Silesius see p. 430, note 9.

³ Gen. 1:2. On Henry More see p. 452, note 15; on the elder Van Helmont's popularization of Paracelsus' doctrine of archeus see p. 412, note 37; and p. 328, note 14. On the vitalistic movement see p. 508, note 2.

⁴ "Nothing is in the intellect which has not already been in the senses – except the intellect itself."

⁵ The capable observers alluded to are Malpighi, Leeuwenhoek, and Swammerdam. Malpighi had formulated the cell theory in his *Anatome plantarum* (1675), Leeuwenhoek discovered spermatazoa, and Swammerdam was known for his studies of the transformations of insects. On the controversy between the ovulist followers of Harvey and the animalculists following Leeuwenhoek, Leibniz does not here take a position (see Wundt, *Leibniz*, pp. 54–56).

⁶ See p. 461, n. 11.

⁷ Especially in the articles on "Averroes" and on "Spinoza".