

Metaphysics of Freedom

Struggle for Synthesis: The Seventeenth Century Background of Leibniz's Synthesis of Order and Freedom, by Leroy E. Loemker, *Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1972. 298 pp.*

STUDIES OF seventeenth century philosophy in its cultural setting frequently tend either toward a myopic examination of detail which excludes an appreciation of the dominant currents of the time or toward an apriorist theory of the march of history with which philosophies and cultural phenomena are made to conform. While the conclusions of the former suffer what has been called "a death by a thousand qualifications," the speculations of the latter are often caricatures at best. In this context Professor Loemker's book is a rare find for he manages to balance a scholarly understanding of the thinkers of the period with an unflinching assessment of the significance of their response to and redefinition of cultural values.

His principal thesis concerns the nature of human freedom and its relation to cultural and metaphysical order. The issues of the period are brought into focus through an investigation of the conflict between the libertine who "finds freedom in escape from bondage to authority, whether civil, religious, or ethical" and the man of good will or honor who "finds freedom and fulfillment in the Stoic virtue of *honestas*, that is, in loyal conformity to a superior order or rule by which he governs his life." The ideal which was to win widespread acceptance in the centuries to follow was, of course, that of the libertine, and our contemporary irrationalism and rejection of absolutes can in many ways be traced to this victory. Loemker's book is written with the conviction that an understanding of the

roots of twentieth century cultural crises requires an assessment of the reasons for the libertine victory. Foremost among these is the failure of the thinkers of the seventeenth century to arrive at a common ideal of order which could inspire confidence in the face of historical forces toward the fragmentation and isolation of the individual. The "struggle for synthesis" was nothing other than a continuing effort to formulate an ideal of rationality and metaphysical order which could accommodate the growing spirit of individualism. While others have concentrated on the "irreversible" tide of events which swept away confidence in established institutions and traditional metaphysical explanations in an effort to understand our contemporary alienation, Loemker examines the fateful decisions which were made by the synthesizers and the inadequacies in their positions with an eye toward restoring the kind of conception of metaphysical order which can be used as a basis for defining the goals of human freedom within an ideal of social and cultural harmony. Accordingly he is mainly concerned with the ways in which the several philosophers of the period—and Leibniz in particular—attempted "to achieve an enlarged rational ordering of human understanding, action, and taste" in response to the revolt against tradition which was taking place in the name of individual freedom. The premise of his study is that the failure of these philosophers to arrive at an adequate synthesis does not rule out the possibility of achieving one. Indeed, if the irrationalism and subjectivism of the twentieth century can be seen as a *reductio ad absurdum* of the libertine ideal of human excellence and social relations, then it is legitimate to return to the seventeenth century efforts at synthesis in order to locate the defects which must be corrected if a revised metaphysics of freedom is to replace the libertine view.

The libertine position was both the result of and reinforcement for the tendencies toward revolt and skepticism which en-

couraged an atomistic individualism. Ironically the rationalists, in their efforts at providing an alternative to the libertine position, often had the historical effect of confirming the very theses which they set out to disprove. Descartes' attempt to defeat the skeptic on his own ground through the method of doubt results instead in the criteria for certainty being defined in subjective terms. His nonintellectual voluntarism, which was proposed in order to allow for human freedom and to explain the possibility of error, contributes to the location of value in individual intuition and feeling. Spinoza's denial that everyday decisions should be based on a transcendental order of value ("We do not desire things because they are good; they are good because we desire them.") and his grounding of social order on a principle of utility reinforces the same trend. It is only Leibniz's system, with its emphasis on the Platonic notion of a microcosm-macrocosm relationship, which defines value in such a way that the possibility of reducing it (and its correlate, freedom) to subjective terms is precluded. On this view the divine perfections of wisdom, goodness, and power are manifest in the creation, or macrocosm, as well as in the microcosm of human experience, and this immanence of the transcendentals insures a universal harmony in which the powers of individuals are adjusted to each other. Thus individual self-realization is guaranteed within the framework of social harmony.

The great challenge to this view comes from the consideration of the problem of evil. If conflict and social discord are recognized, how are we to maintain the view that the maximization of value in "the best of all possible worlds" is necessarily realized? One of Leibniz's answers—and the one which has usually been associated with his position—was that conflicts and disasters merely precede greater harmonies which would not be possible without them. This answer, of course, sows the seed for a later skepticism if indeed history does not reveal greater harmonies following from

discord. Inasmuch as Leibniz's optimism has not been vindicated by history, it might be said with some justice that his commitment to this position on the problem of evil—and the consequent identification of rationalism with an unbridled optimism—was one of the determinants in the victory of the libertine and the widespread conviction that the exercise of human freedom is solely a function of subjective preference.

But Loemker shows that Leibniz did provide—at least implicitly—another account of freedom and the possibility of evil which did not rest upon a confusion of the real with the ideal and which consequently allows for a genuine human choice, including the possibility of choosing evil, without assuming that the result of such a choice will be for the greater good of all in the long run. On this view the microcosm of human experience still reflects the macrocosm of creation, but the divine attributes of wisdom, goodness, and power are now ingredient in man's experience only in the form of a principle for the "best possible" selection among limited alternatives, and the decision of whether to make the principle the basis for action is left to individual choice. The law of one's individual nature does not determine one's fate down to the last detail; rather, it is "necessary but not sufficient to determine one's acts, without the intervention of a further application of the principle of sufficient reason in the form of man's having to choose, from among the possible specific acts implied by the law of his nature, those particular acts which are best in each particular situation." While man cannot undermine the permanent order which guarantees the potential for good, he can fail to realize the best possible relative to his own finite condition if he decides to reject the fulfillment which is possible through "conformity to a superior order." On Loemker's interpretation Leibniz retains the metaphysical order which is required for the freedom of the man of good will while recognizing the elements of individual freedom and the possibilities for evil which

the libertine had insisted were only intelligible from his point of view. Although Leibniz's synthesis did not succeed in inspiring the generations which followed with the vision of the man of good will, Loemker argues convincingly that it remains a viable basis for a revised metaphysic which can serve to define human freedom more accurately than is possible on the basis of the discredited libertine ideal.

Reviewed by THOMAS AUXTER

The Alien Observer

The Pattern of Maugham: A Critical Portrait, by Anthony Curtis, *New York: Taplinger Publishing Company, Inc., 1974. 278 pp. \$10.95.*

MR. CURTIS' ANALYSIS of Somerset Maugham's writings is subtitled "A Critical Portrait"; it would be better described as "An Appreciative Celebration." It is refreshing to read literary criticism today that is neither written in academic technical jargon nor more concerned with the patristic quarrels of other critics than with the gospel of the author it is supposed to discuss. Nevertheless, despite his happy insights and his easy readability, Mr. Curtis does go too far in the other direction, so that Maugham's very real, if limited, literary achievement is in danger of being buried beneath two memorial mounds—the one of detailed accounts of minor works, the other of an excess of laudatory adjectives more appropriate to publishers' encomiums.

Mr. Curtis is well aware that Maugham is not among the greatest and rightly still