

Robert Merrihew Adams and Leibniz

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Abstract

This essay reviews Robert Merrihew Adams' approaches to the philosophy of Leibniz, both his general methodological approaches, and some of the main themes of his work. It attempts to assess his contribution both to the study of Leibniz and to the history of philosophy more generally.

Robert Merrihew Adams began the introduction to his magisterial *Leibniz: Determinist, Theist, Idealist* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1994) with the following remark: "The last twenty years or so have seen a flowering of Leibniz studies."¹ He goes on to mention a number of factors that contributed to that renaissance, most notably the revival of metaphysics among analytic philosophers, as well as the renewed interest in modal logic coming from the work of such younger philosophers as Saul Kripke and David Lewis in the 1970s and 1980s. The long shadow of Bertrand Russell's 1900 *Critical Exposition of the Philosophy of Leibniz* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1900) was still very much in evidence in the early 1970s. Russell's Leibniz was an appropriate companion to his own early analytic program: for Russell's Leibniz, philosophy was generated out of logic, as was, in a way, his own philosophy. Russell's Leibniz, centered on his program for logic, was also congenial to the anti-metaphysical Logical Positivist program that, transmitted to these shores, was another important influence on Anglo-American analytic philosophy. But with Kripke and Lewis and others, analytic philosophy was evolving in the late 1960s and early 1970s. Analytic metaphysics was beginning to be a lively and going concern, and with it the new modal logic, grounded in possible worlds.

Adams was very much a part of that generation that pioneered the new direction that analytic philosophy was taking. And he was very much involved in the studies of Leibniz on such issues as contingency, transworld identity problems and counterfactuals. Adams may have been somewhat unusual in the direction in which the influence went. I suspect that for many, it was the contemporary metaphysics that led them to look to Leibniz as a precursor. But in his philosophical autobiography, Adams tells a different story. Though trained in logic and analytic philosophy as an undergraduate at Princeton and as a graduate student at Oxford and Cornell, in

his first position at the University of Michigan, he reports that he was hired to teach the history of philosophy.² Of his engagement with metaphysics, Adams writes:

In the late 1960s, analytical philosophers who wanted to think about metaphysics were still struggling to figure out how to do it. I found that the great philosophers of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries had engaged metaphysical questions quite directly, and had done so, in their best work, with the sort of clarity and rigor to which analytical philosophers aspired. They became my models for thinking about metaphysics and, in effect, my teachers in metaphysics.³

But his work also took Leibniz into other rather different directions. One of those directions was theology and the philosophy of religion. Religion and theology were very important to Adams since his earliest years.⁴ In addition to his Ph.D. in Philosophy from Cornell, Adams has a B.A. and M.A. in Theology from Mansfield College, Oxford, as well as a B.D. from Princeton Theological Seminary. Much of his work outside of Leibniz has been concerned with the philosophy of religion and with philosophical theology, taken broadly to include theological approaches to ethics. And much of his work on Leibniz has been on Leibniz's views on religion and theology.⁵ A third theme that has engaged Adams is Leibniz's idealism. In recent writings, Adams has confessed to a philosophical predilection for a kind of idealist metaphysics that goes back to his youth.⁶ This, no doubt, motivated him to work on this aspect of Leibniz's thought. (Adams has also worked on another philosophical idealist, Bishop Berkeley, probably for similar reasons.⁷) Adams has been one of the most vigorous defenders of idealist readings of Leibniz's philosophy, arguing that Leibniz should be read as an idealist from at least the mid-1680s to the end of his life. In all three of these areas, Adams' work has been important in shaping the work that has been done on Leibniz in the last twenty or thirty years. As philosophical fashions have changed and debates about necessity and contingency and possible worlds are no longer quite as central as they were in the 1970s and 1980s, discussions of the related topics in Leibniz are no longer quite as central as they once were. But meanwhile, interest in Leibniz's philosophical theology has increased greatly. And debates over Leibniz's idealism and when he became an idealist, if, indeed, he can ever be described as being an idealist, have raged within the community of Leibnizians. Adams' *Leibniz* is at the center of all of these discussions. For a great many commentators writing in English, this book is the necessary starting place for all such discussions, taking the place Russell's *Leibniz* once held as the essential citation. A brief investigation on Google Scholar shows that since it was published

in 1994 Adams' book has become the most cited commentary on Leibniz written in English after Russell, and that by a very wide margin.

It would be worthwhile to examine some details of Adams' influential readings of Leibniz. Here the temptation is great to go another round on the question of idealism in the middle years, a subject on which Adams and I have been exchanging arguments for many years. I have maintained that in the period of the *Discours de métaphysique* and the Correspondence with Arnauld, Leibniz saw the foundation of his metaphysics not in non-extended and mind-like simple substances, what he would later call monads, but in corporeal substances, extended and like living animals. Adams has responded with some very challenging arguments for why it is appropriate to read Leibniz's later monadological metaphysics back into these earlier texts, written before the later terminology of monads was introduced.⁸ The debate continues, not only between Adams and myself, but now among a host of others, taking both sides of the issue, as well as introducing new and more complex perspectives.⁹ But I will restrain myself. Instead, I would like to say something about what has been distinctive about Adams' approach to Leibniz, and what I have learned from studying his work.

Adams' approach to the history of philosophy is unapologetically philosophical. In the introduction to his *Leibniz*, Adams writes:

...I believe that R. G. Collingwood's view, that the proper method of history is that of rethinking past thoughts in one's own mind, is largely true of the history of philosophy. The aim of the rethinking is to discover the inner rationale of the thoughts one studies. ... The *historical* question in the history of philosophy is what the actual rationale was. It is a question we cannot very well answer without attaining a good *philosophical* understanding of the rationale. To do that, we must try to develop the arguments involved in the rationale, and we must subject the rationale, as we understand it, to searching criticism. For it is a piece of philosophy we are trying to understand, and argument and criticism are essential to philosophy.¹⁰

Part of Adams' fascination with Leibniz is for what he conceives of as its genuine philosophical importance. Again, in the introduction to his *Leibniz* he claims that a version of the ontological argument for the existence of God closely related to Leibniz's version seems to him "perhaps to be the most promising of all a priori arguments for the existence of God."¹¹ About the theory of monads, Adams writes:

In fact, I believe that Leibniz's theory of monads, in its essentials, though not in all its details, represents an important, permanent metaphysical alternative,

one of the handful of fundamental views in this area that has a real chance of being true.¹²

More generally, Adams sees the philosophical significance of the history of philosophy in the way in which it offers alternative philosophical visions to the ones we take for granted. Adams is eloquent in his defense of this conception of the philosophical importance of the history of philosophy:

Progress in philosophy is more likely to consist in understanding possible alternatives than arriving at settled conclusions. And we are familiar enough with the familiar; part of what the great dead philosophers offer us is alternatives to our usual way of thinking—alternatives thought out in great depth and with uncommon rational sensitivity. Part of what we are doing in studying the history of philosophy, moreover, is placing our own philosophizing in its largest context in a conversation that has been going on for many hundreds of years. Just as we are likely to understand better what we are doing in any discussion if we accurately remember and understand how it has gone, so we are likely to understand our own philosophizing better if our conception of its longer historical context is accurate.¹³

The argument—with which I completely agree—is that learning from Leibniz as a philosophy *requires* us to take seriously the historical project of understanding him carefully, on his own terms, and in context.

Adams still has a lot to teach us about how to approach a philosopher like Leibniz in a way that is both rigorously historical and philosophically illuminating. Reading his early essay, “Leibniz’s Theories of Contingency,”¹⁴ later reworked as chapt. 1 of *Leibniz*, was, for me, a revelation, and a model for my own work. What still strikes me as remarkable is the way in which he is able to capture the complexity of Leibniz’s thought, the way in which Leibniz can take a problem and explore a number of different avenues of solution at the same time, trying them out, subjecting them to criticism, without prematurely or dogmatically adopting one solution. Adams shows how Leibniz tries different ways of developing the idea that things are only necessary if their contrary is impossible, exploring in his letter to Magnus Wedderkoph in 1671 and later texts that God is necessitated by his own goodness to choose the best, and does so necessarily, without giving up the idea that things are in themselves contingent and remain possible even if they are not chosen by God.¹⁵ Adams provides a careful story of the development of this line of argument, particularly in the late 1670s and early 1680s, and its persistence through his career.¹⁶ But Adams also shows a different line of argument in Leibniz’s thought that

arises in the 1680s and later, on which he denies that God necessarily actualizes the best of all possible worlds. In connection with this, Adams notes a period in which Leibniz experiments with the idea that it is only contingent that a given world is the best of all possible worlds.¹⁷ Another line that Leibniz explores in this period, on Adams' reading, is the famous theory of infinite analysis, that while the concept of the predicate is contained in the concept of the subject, it requires an infinite analysis to determine it.¹⁸ Adams also shows how Leibniz explores the idea that "God chooses what is best" is itself a contingent truth for Leibniz.¹⁹ In this way Adams teaches us how to read Leibniz. To establish what Leibniz thinks it is not enough to point to a text and interpret it accurately. Certainly, a given text may give us *prima facie* reason to believe that Leibniz believed something at a given time. But Leibniz was always thinking, and rethinking, and exploring different options, different strands of thought: this is the way in which he worked. While there are definitely certain constants in his views, beliefs he remained committed to for extended periods of time, he was also a philosopher with an extremely searching intelligence. What Adams has shown us is that a proper interpretation of Leibniz is not always a question of determining *what* he thought on a given issue, but *how* he thought about it, the way in which he approached it, the different positions he considered and weighed. This has shaped my own way of approaching this very complicated and subtle thinker.

Another characteristic feature of Adams' approach to Leibniz is his knowledge of and respect for texts. There was a time in which one could do Leibniz scholarship simply by reading a few canonical texts, such as the *Discourse on Metaphysics* or the *Monadology*, usually in English translation, and commenting on them. In this context, it is enormously impressive to consider is the wide range of texts to which Adams appeals in his commentaries. In addition to the "standard" texts, Adams routinely appeals to a wide variety of letters, short pieces, notes, including often material only recently published or available only in manuscript. Unlike many of his North American colleagues at the time, from early in his career Adams was in close contact with scholars at the Leibniz-Forschungsstelle at Münster and the Leibniz-Archiv at Hannover, eager to use the latest results of the very best scholarship in his writings. And at a time when North American scholars limited themselves to reading one another's commentaries, Adams was regularly citing secondary material in French, German and Italian. Adams' work has been instrumental in raising the bar for North American scholarship not only in Leibniz, but more generally in the history of philosophy: his example was important in the transformation of scholar-

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ship that has made it possible for North American scholars to enter the international community, not only to take seriously scholarship from other national traditions, but to have North American scholarship taken seriously by serious scholars in other countries.

At the same time, Adams' work has kept its relevance for contemporary philosophy. I don't quite know how he does it, but Adams is able to interweave problems of contemporary relevance in his historical work without ever lapsing into anachronism. This makes his work, particularly his work on the issues of necessity and possibility and on Leibniz's philosophical theology of interest not only to the readers of this journal, but to the wider philosophical community as well.

I can't talk about Adams' students; it is not easy to find an accurate list, and I fear leaving any out. But in the broader sense, many of us, including me, are his students, insofar as we have learned so much about how to do the history of philosophy from his example.

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Notes

¹ Adams, *Leibniz*, p. 3. Adams gives a fuller account of the twentieth-century reception of Leibniz in "The Reception of Leibniz's Philosophy in the Twentieth Century," in G. A. J. Rogers, Tom Sorell, and Jill Kraye, eds., *Insiders and Outsiders in Seventeenth Century Philosophy*. (New York: Routledge, 2010), pp. 309-14.

² See Robert M. Adams, "A Philosophical Autobiography," in Samuel Newlands and Larry M. Jorgensen, eds., *Metaphysics and the Good: Themes from the Philosophy of Robert Merrihew Adams* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), pp. 16-32, esp. pp. 22-23.

³ Adams, "A Philosophical Autobiography," p. 24. For his involvement with the

new metaphysics of his generation, see pp. 30ff.

⁴ On this see Adams, “A Philosophical Autobiography,” pp. 17ff.

⁵ This is the theme of part II of *Leibniz*. See also Adams, “Leibniz’s ‘Examination of the Christian Religion’,” *Faith and Philosophy* 11 (1994), pp. 517-546.

⁶ See Robert M. Adams, “Idealism Vindicated,” in Peter van Inwagen and Dean Zimmerman, eds., *Persons: Human and Divine* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2007), pp. 35-54. See also “A Philosophical Autobiography,” p. 17.

⁷ See Adams, “Berkeley and Epistemology,” in Ernest Sosa, ed., *Essays on the Philosophy of George Berkeley* (Dordrecht: Reidel, 1987), pp. 143-61. Adams also published an edition of Berkeley’s *Three Dialogues between Hylas and Philonous* (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1979).

⁸ My original proposal was presented in “Leibniz and the Foundations of Physics: the Middle Years,” in K. Okruhlik and J. R. Brown, eds., *The Natural Philosophy of Leibniz* (Dordrecht: Reidel, 1985), pp. 27-130. Adams responded in a number of articles, culminating in part III of his *Leibniz*. The discussion continued with a number of exchanges, eventually resulting in my book, *Leibniz: Body, Substance, Monad* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), which is, in a way, a response to Adams’ *Leibniz*. The last public exchange was on the pages of this *Review*, with Adams’ review of my book (*Leibniz Review* 20 (2010), pp. 51-71) and my response (*Leibniz Review* 20 (2010), pp. 73-79).

⁹ For some recent contributions to the discussion, see, e.g., Glenn Hartz, *Leibniz’s Final System: Monads, Matter and Animals* (London and New York: Routledge, 2007); Peter Loftson and Richard Arthur, “Leibniz’s Body Realism: Two Interpretations,” *Leibniz Review* 16 (2006), pp. 1-42; Jeffrey McDonough, “Leibniz’s Conciliatory Account of Substance,” *Philosophers’ Imprint*, forthcoming; Pauline Phemister, *Leibniz and the Natural World: Activity, Passivity, and Corporeal Substances in Leibniz’s Philosophy* (Dordrecht: Springer, 2005); Donald Rutherford, “Leibniz as Idealist,” *Oxford Studies in Early Modern Philosophy* 4 (2008), pp. 141-90.

¹⁰ Adams, *Leibniz*, p. 6.

¹¹ Adams, *Leibniz*, p. 4.

¹² Adams, *Leibniz*, p. 5.

¹³ Adams, *Leibniz*, pp. 5-6.

¹⁴ *Rice University Studies* 63 (1977): 1-41.

¹⁵ Adams, *Leibniz*, chapt. 1, § 1.

¹⁶ Adams, *Leibniz*, pp. 19ff.

¹⁷ Adams, *Leibniz*, § 2.1.

¹⁸ Adams, *Leibniz*, § 2.2.

¹⁹ Adams, *Leibniz*, § 2.5.