

German Scholarship on Leibniz, 1900-1945

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The end of World War II marked the beginning of a new chapter in German Leibniz scholarship, with conferences all over the country gearing up to commemorate the 300th anniversary of his birth in 1946, and participants intent on promoting Leibniz as a pan-European thinker. Just a few years earlier, for obvious reasons, the outlook could not have been more different. To take one example, Oskar Becker, in his lecture, “Leibniz, the German Thinker and Good European,” had divided the different versions of Leibniz up along strictly national lines: “In the international Leibniz literature of today the different aspects of his philosophy... are shown in the views of one nation from this, of another nation from that side. Thus for the West European scholars Louis Couturat and Bertrand Russell Leibniz is fundamentally a logician, while for the Germans he is fundamentally a metaphysician (and sometimes a philosopher of culture).”¹

This assessment was not just a reflection of the era’s politically obligatory opposition to “West European” ideas. There really had been a very distinct tradition of Leibniz interpretation in Germany not just under National Socialism, but also in the several decades leading up to this period, one that accentuated Leibniz’s anticipation of the metaphysics of Hegel and the culture-oriented philosophy of Nietzsche and Dilthey much more than his contribution to the development of philosophical logic. Much of this work does involve a disturbing and crude emphasis on the national character of a philosopher’s ideas; but this work also, in part *because* of its appreciation for ways of thinking that Russell and Couturat found unbecoming of a logician as great as Leibniz, also keeps alive a version of the philosopher that should be of interest in the current climate of Leibniz scholarship, which, if I’ve managed to take its pulse with any accuracy, is keen on abandoning the monolithic interpretation of the Russellian tradition and rediscovering in Leibniz a multifaceted and eclectic thinker.

I. Secondary Literature

In the space of this brief sketch, I can do nothing more than convey a feeling for the sort of work that was being done on Leibniz in Germany in the period extending roughly from the *fin de siècle* until the end of the second world war. I have marked this period off somewhat arbitrarily, particularly at its earlier end, as a chapter of Leibniz’s *Rezeptionsgeschichte*. But periodization is always arbitrary, while without it the past remains an amorphous blob. In this case, it is not entirely

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arbitrary: these years do in fact witness an attitude toward Leibniz—albeit one that emerged gradually—that we do not discern in the decades before or after. In order to see this, a good place to start is with a look at the secondary literature generated in this period, whether it turned out to be influential or, like most scholarship, quickly fell into obscurity.

In the early decades of the nineteenth century, and right up through the period under consideration, there was a growing sense that the Wolffian school had distorted the basic features of Leibniz's thought, and that the surest way to rediscover these would be to turn to the original writings. "Back to Leibniz himself!" seems to have become a guiding slogan for many scholars, and in consequence there emerged an industry dedicated to the edition of previously unavailable texts (an industry still thriving today, as it has, with just a bit of exaggeration, a practically inexhaustible raw material to draw upon). The most noteworthy contributions to Leibniz edition in this period are J. E. Erdmann's edition of the *Opera philosophica* in 1839, and Guhrauer's edition of the German writings, 1838-1840. Later in the century we have Onno Klopp's edition of selected works, beginning in 1864, and finally, beginning in 1875, C. I. Gerhardt's excellent edition of the philosophical writings. At the same time, there seems to have been a trend in this period among philosophers with particular agendas to essay interpretations of Leibniz that would serve to ground their own philosophical positions within the broader context of the development of German philosophy. A notable early example of this is Ludwig Feuerbach's *Exposition, Development, and Critique of Leibniz's Philosophy* of 1837.

The full story is of course tremendously complicated, but on quantitative grounds alone it is clear that throughout the second half of the nineteenth century Leibniz increasingly took on the role of an initial reference point within historically oriented German philosophy (and, barring a few figures, such as Frege, such philosophy certainly predominated). The stream of studies of Leibniz's thought in the mid-nineteenth century had turned into a river by the turn of the twentieth. Right around the time Russell and Couturat were putting the finishing touches on their own epoch-making studies, from the well-known German figures writing on Leibniz (to be discussed in more detail in the following section), there appear in these years Ernst Cassirer's *Leibniz's System in its Scientific Foundations* (1902), various of Wilhelm Dilthey's historiographical works dealing with Leibniz's place in the history of philosophy, and Edmund Husserl's *Logical Investigations* (1900). The following decades saw a flood of young German scholars cutting their philosophical teeth on Leibniz's philosophy. These include a high proportion of comparative works or accounts of the reception of others, such as Johannes Pitschel, A

GERMAN SCHOLARSHIP ON LEIBNIZ, 1900-1945

Comparison of Leibniz' and Kant's Theories of Space (1905); Siegfried Gelles, *The Pantheistic Ideas in Leibniz's Theodicy, and Schleiermacher's Lectures on Religion* (1908); Robert Merten, *On the Significance of Leibniz's Nouveaux essais sur l'entendement humain for Kant's Viewpoint in the Dissertation De mundi sensibilis atque intelligibilis forma et principiis of 1770* (1908); Reinhold Schmerler, *Ludwig Feuerbach's Leibniz Interpretation* (1911); Wilhelm Bohn, *Leibniz and Hume as Theorists of Knowledge* (1916).

Other than a few rather dated works on Leibniz's connection to contemporary intellectual trends, such as Hans Ganz, *The Unconscious in Leibniz, in Relation to Modern Theories* (1917), this period also saw a number of dissertations tackling core issues in Leibniz's metaphysics, issues that continue to stimulate dissertations on Leibniz today. To mention a few: Ulrich Zymalkowski, *The Significance of Preestablished Harmony in Leibniz's System* (1905); Friedrich Wilhelm Schmitz, *On the Relation of the Theory of Monads to Theology and Theodicy in Leibniz* (1906); Hans Ludwig Koch, *The Problem of Body in Leibniz's Early Writings* (1908); Wilhelm Winhold, *On the Concept of Freedom and its Foundations in Leibniz* (1912); Bogumil Jasinowski, *Leibniz's Analytic Theory of Judgment in its Relation to his Metaphysics* (1918); Kurt Ufermann, *Investigations of the Law of Continuity in Leibniz* (1927).

Many of these works were written, whether subtly or overtly, from the theoretical perspective of some philosophical movement or another; the tendency represented by Feuerbach, to enlist Leibniz for the aims of a quite particular philosophical program, continued into the twentieth century, with all of the major trends in German philosophy of this period, including phenomenology, neo-Kantianism, and, for lack of a better term, philosophy of the human sciences, finding a prominent place for Leibniz in their respective takes on the history of philosophy. Let us look very briefly at the reception of Leibniz in Husserl, Cassirer, and Dilthey, three of the most influential thinkers representing these trends.

II. Leibniz in the Major Philosophical Currents of the Day

Husserl was given to describing his own phenomenology as a "new monadology," and expressed throughout his career an intense admiration for Leibniz's philosophy. In his late, lecture-based work, *Cartesian Meditations* (1931), he explicitly seeks to transform Leibniz's metaphysical theory of monads into a phenomenological theory of intersubjectivity. Overall, it may be said that Husserl's interest in Leibniz amounts to an appropriation of a few central concepts, rather than an engagement with the historical figure and his ideas. There does not, for that matter, appear to be any interest in engaging with this figure. Nonetheless, Husserl's

reception of Leibniz would prove to influence the perception of him throughout the later phenomenological tradition as a philosopher focused largely upon the analysis of intersubjective experience.

The neo-Kantians, and those closely affiliated with this movement, were considerably more interested in the historical Leibniz. Neo-Kantian, or perhaps post-neo-Kantian, Leibniz interpretation in the period under discussion is represented most visibly, of course, by the work of Ernst Cassirer,² though other members of the Marburg school, such as Albert Görland³ and Walter Kinkel,⁴ also made significant contributions. These interpreters agree with the Russell-Couturat approach in so far as they take the ultimate truth about Leibniz's philosophy to be discernible only through an investigation of the logical principles of knowledge, through an analysis of judgments and not of things. For Cassirer, logic constitutes the formal structure on which a system is built, while the material for this building can come only from the specific sciences. We are only able to gain knowledge of intelligible mathematical objects through the mediation of sensuous objects. The finite understanding is perpetually in need of images and would be completely lost without the crutch of a universal characteristic.

Cassirer shares with his contemporaries Russell and Couturat the conviction that Leibniz's greatest attainments were in the domain of symbolic logic. But Cassirer emphasizes more than Russell and Couturat the dependence of logic upon 'input' from the natural sciences. Leibniz, Cassirer thinks, was the first to understand the true character of mathematical symbolism, and to grasp that the problem of the "logic of things" is necessarily connected with the problem of the "logic of signs." For Cassirer, Leibniz's genius consisted not so much in the development of a *characteristica universalis* as in understanding the ways in which the *scientia generalis* relies upon the *characteristica*. In emphasizing this connection between logic and natural science, Cassirer's interpretation of Leibniz resembles less that of Russell than that of his countryman Dietrich Mahnke, for whom, as we will see, Leibniz's great achievement lay in his ability to straddle some of the fundamental conceptual divides in the history of philosophy, particularly that between abstract formalism and lived experience.

In the same period, thinkers such as Ernst Troeltsch⁵ and, most significantly, Wilhelm Dilthey, sought to understand Leibniz not so much synchronically, as the expositor of a historically isolated metaphysics, but rather as occupying a place in the history of the development of "spirit." Spirit, in Dilthey's understanding, includes not just philosophy, but all "systems of culture," among them religion, art, law, etc. Dilthey identifies Leibniz's philosophy as an "objective idealism,"

by which he means something very different than Kant had in using the same term. In his *Types of Worldview and their Development in Metaphysical Systems* (1911), Dilthey distinguishes three basic worldviews, naturalism, idealism of freedom, and objective idealism. This latter, which also has Heraclitus and Hegel as representatives, is characterized by its monism and its understanding of reality as consisting in the harmonization of conflicting forces. Each of the world-views is a “perspectival” interpretation of reality, and each emphasizes an equally real aspect of the world, though none, in Dilthey’s view, tells the complete story.

Dilthey was intent on revealing the historical embeddedness of the ideas of the early modern philosophers, the way in which the minds of figures like Leibniz reflected the phase of scientific thought current in their time. For Dilthey, great philosophers do not so much channel timeless truth as they do the *Zeitgeist*, and the very fact that their ideas represent their historical location shows the relativity of the truth-content of their systems. But Dilthey insists that truth, whatever it is, is not something representative. The great metaphysical systems of the earlier modern period, in particular Leibniz’s theory of monads, represent, in Dilthey’s view, efforts to deal with the new findings of natural sciences. These efforts, though, invariably distort natural science, since they “transpose elements from inner psychic life onto nature, and, conversely, they diminish mental life by seeking a natural nexus in the will.”⁶

There were, of course, other significant philosophical movements for which Leibniz was a significant point of reference. It is perhaps these three, though, that had the greatest impact on twentieth-century European philosophy. Husserl, Cassirer, and Dilthey were worldly philosophers, not susceptible to an overly simplistic interpretation, widespread at the time, of the thought of their German predecessors as mere instances of the expression of an abstract, collective way of thinking characteristic of the entire nation. As we will see in the next section, a significant strain of Leibniz interpretation in this period sought to understand Leibniz in terms of his role in the development of a tradition of thought perceived as distinctively German, extending back long before the beginning of the modern period and into the twentieth century.

III. Leibniz as a German

We saw above a statement of the German perception of the difference between indigenous and “West European” Leibniz interpretation as consisting in a greater emphasis on Leibniz’s metaphysics. The question remains what precisely metaphysics was taken to denote by those who understood Leibniz in this way. Some

took the term to denote, in its uniquely German context, that which is opposed to the rationality of the intellectual traditions of other nations. These thinkers were prone to an overgeneralizing identification of the “German” with the “mystical” and the “Western” with the “rational”.

Leibniz, trilingual and straddling both traditions, was a symbol of great pride for some German scholars precisely because he was seen as equally at home with both approaches to philosophy: neither as provincial as a Paracelsus, nor as cold and calculating as a Descartes. Leibniz was sometimes credited with having brought seventeenth-century Germany up to the level of the European countries west of it, with respect to technology, science, and culture, without in so doing selling Germany out to the values of these neighboring countries. In a 1916 speech representative of this attitude, given on the 200th anniversary of Leibniz’s death to the Historical Union of Lower Saxony, Paul Ritter observes that “in a time when we were threatening to lag behind the other nations of culture, the Italians, French, and English, Leibniz brought us the great achievements of foreign science and even expanded and deepened them with his life’s own rich work. With Leibniz, the German spirit again entered into the general struggle and effort of the Occident, as an equal-born comrade-in-arms, for the progress of human thought.”⁷

The opposition between German and “Western” thought was also based on a supposed, distinctively German tradition of Heracliteanism (we saw above that even Dilthey saw Leibniz and the pre-Socratic as kindred spirits), of celebration of contradiction and dynamism, in opposition to the “Western” dependence on Aristotle’s excluded middle, on logical consistency and the mechanical order thought to be a physical expression of this. In a word, *Geist* was opposed to *Intelligenz*. An extreme statement of this vision of German philosophy comes from Alfred Klemmt in 1938: “[T]he sort of thought represented by a Meister Eckhart, a Paracelsus, a Nicholas of Cusa and a Jakob Böhme, a Leibniz and a Herder, a Goethe and a Schelling, a Hegel and even a Nietzsche, was a logic of... contradiction, of the unity of opposites, of the infinite wealth of interconnections, of the organic and dynamic, in short, a logic that strove to comprehend the innermost structure of reality and the beating pulse of life itself.”⁸ Now, it might seem unfair to conflate the account of German philosophy coming from a fully discredited ideologue such as Klemmt with that of respectable Leibniz scholars from earlier in the century. Nonetheless, it is precisely those features of German thought emphasized by Klemmt -the synthesis of opposites, organicity and dynamicity, the emphasis on lived reality, and the centuries-long continuity of the indigenous tradition- that are also emphasized by some of the most prominent scholars of Leibniz

from the first decades of the twentieth century, those we continue to reference today, such as Dietrich Mahnke, Willy Kabitz,⁹ and Heinz Heimsoeth.¹⁰ Let us take a closer look at the emphasis on one of these features, that of synthesis, in particular, the synthesis of universal and the individual.

Mahnke, in his classic work *Leibniz's Synthesis of Universal Mathematics and the Metaphysics of the Individual* (1925), identifies Leibniz as a forerunner of Hegel, in so far as both philosophers are intent on performing syntheses of various concepts generally received in philosophy as polar opposites.¹¹ Mahnke criticizes the work of German contemporaries, such as Heimsoeth's *The Method of Knowledge in Descartes and Leibniz* (1914), and Schmalenbach's *Leibniz* (1921), for wrongly discerning conflicts between various domains of Leibniz's thought, in the case of the first author, between "religious-metaphysical personalism" and "methodological formalism," of the second, between "arithmetic-Calvinistic pluralism" (!) and "geometrical-mystical monism," both variations on the old universal/particular dichotomy. The theory of monads, in Mahnke's view, is an effort to render compatible the individuality of substances with their universal context. In order to do this, Mahnke thinks, Leibniz adopts a view, according to which, "every part of the whole signifies [bedeutet] the whole;"¹² as Leibniz himself writes, "le monde [est] tout entier dans chacune de ses parties."¹³

The Leibnizian theme of containment of the universe within each individual was seen, not erroneously, by many as a variation on an older German mystical idea, as well as an anticipation of one of the basic figures of German romanticism. Another early twentieth-century commentator, Paul Köhler, for instance, perceives between the fifteenth-century German mystical thinker Nicholas of Cusa and Leibniz "an extensive agreement, often extending even to the words [they use]." In his view, both of their philosophies are centered on the idea that every individual part of the universe is a contraction of the whole and contains everything potentially within itself. For Leibniz, the individual spirit both forms a mirror of the universe and is able to unfold knowledge of all things from itself, without any external influence.¹⁴

From medieval mysticism through Leibniz and up into the nineteenth century, the figure of containment of the whole within its parts was taken by scholars such as Mahnke and Köhler to be one of the cornerstones of a distinctively German tradition of thought. Mahnke relishes passages such as the following from Goethe's cycle of poems, *God and World*:

J. E. H. SMITH

Und es ist das ewig Eine,
Das sich vielfach offenbart;
Klein das Große, groß das Kleine,
Alles nach der eignen Art.¹⁵
[And it is that which is eternally One,
That reveals itself in multiple guises
The large is small, the small is large,
Each in its own fashion.]

It is fair to say that scholars such as those discussed here overemphasized the embeddedness of Leibniz's theory of monads within the tradition outlined above. On the other hand, we today are perhaps guilty of the opposite failure, tending as we do to see the theory as sprouting almost *ex nihilo* from Leibniz's sharp intellect. Scholars such as Mahnke also, perhaps, overemphasized the poetic quality of Leibniz's theory, rather than receiving it as a literal account of how the world works. On the other hand, we today might do well to recognize that Leibniz was not a "pure" scientist, entirely unsusceptible to waxing poetical.

In attempting to give a brief overview of the German Leibniz scholarship of the early twentieth century, it is striking how little one is able to generalize about it, other than to say it is clear that Leibniz was a very important figure. Leibniz was put to many different uses, many of which have since become very unfashionable. But this German Leibniz, with his multifarious interests, his poetic temperament, and his "spiritual" connection to Nicholas of Cusa, Goethe, and Hegel at least, it may be said, provides an interesting contrast to the English and French Leibniz of the same time period.

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Notes

¹ Oskar Becker, "Leibniz, der deutsche Denker und gute Europäer," *Kriegsvorträge der Rheinischen Friedrich-Wilhelms-Universität Bonn*, ed. Karl F. Chudoba, Bonn, 1944.

² The history of Cassirer's exact relation to neo-Kantianism, as embodied paradigmatically by his mentor Hermann Cohen, is a complicated one. We are

justified in speaking of his Leibniz interpretation in the era of the *Philosophy of Symbolic Forms* as neo-Kantian, in any case, since, as discussed below, he relies heavily in this interpretation on Kant's idea of the sensuous-intellectual schema presupposed in all human knowledge.

³ See Albert Görland, *Der Gottesbegriff bei Leibniz. Ein Vorwort zu seinem System* (Gießen, 1907).

⁴ See Walter Kinkel, "Leibniz," in *Große Denker* v. II. Ed. E. von Aster. (Leipzig, 1912), pp. 39-78.

⁵ See Ernst Troeltsch, "Die Logik des historischen Entwicklungsbegriffes," *Kantstudien* XXVII, 1922, pp. 265-297.

⁶ Wilhelm Dilthey, *Introduction to the Human Sciences*, ed. Rudolf A. Makkreel and Frithjof Rodi (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1989), p. 236.

⁷ Paul Ritter, "Leibniz und die deutsche Kultur," *Leibniz: Zum Gedächtnis seines zweihundertjährigen Todestages*. Ed. Historical Union of Lower Saxony, 1-37, p. 7.

⁸ Alfred Klemmt, *Wissenschaft und Philosophie im Dritten Reich* (Berlin, 1938), p. 14.

⁹ See Willy Kabitz, *Die Philosophie des jungen Leibniz. Untersuchungen zur Entwicklungsgeschichte seines Systems* (Heidelberg, 1909).

¹⁰ See, in particular, Heinz Heimsoeth, *Die sechs großen Themen der abendländischen Metaphysik und der Ausgang des Mittelalters* (Berlin, 1922).

¹¹ It is interesting to recall that Russell as well discerned in Leibniz, and was repulsed by, what he took to be elements of an incipient dialectics.

¹² Mahnke, *Leibnizens Synthese*, p. 429.

¹³ G VII 544.

¹⁴ Paul Köhler, *Der Begriff der Repräsentation bei Leibniz. Ein Beitrag zur Entstehungsgeschichte seines Systems* (Bern, 1913), pp. 26-28.

¹⁵ J. W. von Goethe, *Werke*, ed. Heinrich Kurz (Leipzig and Vienna: Bibliographisches Institut, 1879), p. 318.