

Announcement from the Agudat Leibniz Israel:

International Conference

LEIBNIZ: WHAT KIND OF RATIONALIST?

Monday-Thursday, May 30-31 — June 1-2, 2005

Tel-Aviv University and The Van Leer Jerusalem Institute

Rationale

Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz (1646-1716) was perhaps the last of the universal polymaths who contributed significantly to such diverse fields of human thought and activity as metaphysics, epistemology, logic, law, history, politics, mathematics, natural science, theology, linguistics, and technology. Traditional historiography of philosophy has tagged Leibniz as one of the early modern “rationalists”—a label that no doubt has a sound basis in his own *pronunciamentos*, as well as in the *Rezeption* of his work by his contemporaries and by later centuries. Yet, different historians of ideas, different schools of thought, and different times have endowed this label with substantively different meanings—each according to their own bias and emphasis on one or another strand of Leibniz’s thought.

The purpose of this conference is to examine and characterize somewhat more precisely the nature of Leibniz’s “rationalism”.

This is, no doubt, quite an ambitious aim. But it is certainly apposite at this time, when the nature and role of reason and rationality in all human endeavors is under thorough examination in the light of stern criticism of the ‘modern’ reading of these notions. It is also apposite regarding Leibniz scholarship, where some voices have been arguing for a substantive revision of the image of Leibniz’s rationalism as predominantly logic-oriented—an image that prevailed in the 20th century. And it is fundamental for illuminating the transformations the concept of rationality underwent in its path from early modern thought to the late 18th century Enlightenment—a path in which Leibniz occupies a pivotal position.

We are aware of the fact that a possible outcome of the colloquium is to show that the presupposition of its prompting question is false, i.e., that there is not *one* rationalism in Leibniz, but several—possibly incompatible—ones. We would then be in a position similar to that of those who, having searched for the underlying

unity of Leibniz's "system", came up with different answers, one of which consists in viewing it as "plural", i.e. irreducible to any single major component. We owe Leibniz, however, the charity of trying to find out whether and how the unquestionable variety and plurality of his thought is indeed guided and unified by some overarching concept of reason and rationality, albeit different from the one usually attributed to him. After all, he insisted that, if we are to understand the rationality of the world, we must take as global as possible a perspective as we can, so as to approach as much as humanly possible the creator's point of view. Only if we face this challenge head on, as required by the title question of this colloquium, we are entitled to reach, as far as we are concerned (*quoad nos*—as Leibniz would put it), a negative conclusion.

One difficulty that has hampered so far attempts such as the one this colloquium undertakes is the fact that most Leibniz scholars usually act as windowless monads, focusing exclusively on a selected segment of Leibniz's production. This is understandable. Leibniz's immense *oeuvre* remained for the most part unpublished or fragmentarily published after his death. Only in the 20th century a sustained effort has been undertaken to publish systematically and critically all his writings and correspondence. Given the vastness of the material, the task was organized in such a way that it was assigned to different editorial teams, each in charge of a "Series" corresponding (roughly) to thematic clusters of his production in what for us, but not necessarily for Leibniz, amount to different "fields". At present, four such teams are active in Germany, in Hanover, Münster, Potsdam and Berlin—respectively in charge of the mathematical, philosophical, theologico-political and scientific-technological writings. So far, about a third of the envisaged 120 volumes of this edition have been published. The result of this division of labor, without which of course the editorial work could not advance, has been however to entrench the thematic divisions: normally, whoever focuses his attention on one "field" tends to concentrate on the writings in one of the series, largely disregarding the others.

In order to remove this obstacle, and to open the windows of the researchers' monads, the colloquium will bring together leading experts in the various areas of Leibniz's activity. This, we trust, will pave the way for the only way of attempting some sort of synthesis of Leibniz's rationalisms as manifested in his multi-thematic and multi-perspective thought—namely, through a concerted cooperative effort of scholars familiar with different aspects of the *oeuvre*. By 'cooperative' and 'concerted' we do not mean, of course, that criticism and disagreement

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are banned. Quite on the contrary, in the spirit of Leibniz's anti-sectarianism, they are rather strongly encouraged, since—unlike other fellow rationalists—he believed that it is only through a tireless attempt critically to understand each other's contribution that human minds can work together towards the growth of knowledge.

Kinds of expected contributions

Contributions of roughly two kinds are expected from the participants. On the one hand, studies focusing on Leibniz's 'rationalism in action' in any given field of inquiry he dealt with. By this we mean the kinds of theories he proposes in the chosen field, the methodologies he employs, and an analysis of his debates with other scholars in the same area. On the other hand, more synthetic attempts to characterize his rationalism comprehensively. By this we mean comparative studies of his procedures and theories in different fields, attempts to find out assumptions, principles or methods that underlie all of his endeavors, etc.

For further information

For the time being, you can address Marcelo Dascal (dascal@post.tau.ac.il) for further information. Soon a web site for the conference will be operative.

Sponsoring institutions

Agudat Leibniz Israel (E.L.I.);
The Cohen Institute for the History and Philosophy of Science and Ideas, Tel Aviv University;
Department of Philosophy, Tel Aviv University;
The Van Leer Jerusalem Institute;
The Bergman Center for Philosophical Research, the Hebrew University of Jerusalem;
The Leibniz Society of North America

Organizing committee

Marcelo Dascal (Tel Aviv, chair), Elhanan Yakira (Jerusalem, co-chair), Daniel Cook (Brooklyn College, NY), Rifka Feldhay (Tel Aviv), Gideon Freudenthal (Tel Aviv), Ohad Nachtomy (Bar-Ilan), Carl Posy (Jerusalem), Noa Zauderer-Na'aman (Tel Aviv)