

**Leibniz on Wachter's *Elucidarius cabalisticus*:
A Critical Edition of the so-called 'Réfutation de Spinoza'**

by Philip Beeley, Leibniz-Forschungsstelle, Münster

When the translator and editor of the German edition of Bayle's *Historical and Critical Dictionary*,¹ Johann Christoph Gottsched (1700-1766), suggested to Johann Georg Wachter (1673-1757) that he supply an explanation of his views on Spinoza for inclusion in the eponymous article, he gladly obliged.² Wachter, a failed university professor in Duisburg who had since managed to find employment in the council library in Gottsched's adopted home town of Leipzig, had good reasons for doing this. Not only had his *Elucidarius cabalisticus* (1706)³ been fiercely attacked in the *Respublica litteraria* as being the work of a new cabbalist evidently out to defend atheism and other purported evils of Spinoza's philosophy, but also he appeared in that book to have adopted a philosophical position diametrically opposed to the one he had held just a few years earlier. His *Der Spinozismus Im Jüdenthumb*,⁴ which he had published in 1699 after a year-long stay in Amsterdam and which had been directed against a certain Moses Germanus, had after all sought to defend natural religion against Spinoza's philosophy by attacking those elements in it which were seen to represent the greatest threat to an understanding of God and the duties of man based solely on rational knowledge, in particular, its fundamental pantheism.⁵ In effect, while Wachter had there used the demonstration of the cabbalistic roots and the detrimental ethical consequences of Spinoza's philosophy to show that Christianity and Judaism are fundamentally irreconcilable, he now used the first part of that demonstration as the basis for presenting the theory contained in the *Ethics* as a tenable philosophical theology.

Leibniz was an early witness to this volte-face at the beginning of 1701. As a personal acquaintance of Wachter, who was then still seeking to build up his university career with the help of the Prussian minister Paul von Fuchs (1640-1704), the Hannoverian philosopher evidently discussed the topic of Spinoza and the Cabbala with him in Berlin at that time. During this discussion it became apparent to Leibniz, as he notes in a draft letter to Daniel Ernst Jablonski (1660-1741), that the author of the book on Moses Germanus had taken on many of the fanciful ideas of the man which he had earlier sought to refute.⁶ The fact he refers to these ideas as "fanciful" (Grillen) indicates clearly where he stands on the topic. He nevertheless continues to follow the progress of Wachter's thought with interest,

writing extensive notes not only on his mathematical demonstrations of natural law in *Origines juris naturalis* (1704),⁷ but also on his attempt at illuminating the relation between Spinoza and the Cabbala in *Elucidarius cabalisticus*.

Leibniz's suggestion that Wachter might have been influenced by the man he had been trying to defeat is primarily a reference to the circumstances under which *Der Spinozismus Im Judenthumb* came about. During his sojourn in Amsterdam, Wachter had been able to acquire extensive knowledge both of Jewish mysticism and the philosophy of Spinoza. But equally if not more decisive for the writing of this book was a debate which took place there between him and Johann Peter Spaeth (c.1645-1701).⁸ A Roman Catholic by birth, Spaeth had sought spiritual refuge in various Protestant movements, including the Quakers, before eventually converting to Judaism, at which point he adopted the name Moses Germanus. From then onwards up to his death, Spaeth remained loyal to the Jewish faith, despite various efforts by the Wittenberg theologian Philipp Jakob Spener (1635-1705) to bring him back into the Protestant fold. But although Wachter's attacks on Spinoza and the Cabbala at that time were directed principally against Spaeth, there is little evidence to suggest that the former Catholic was actually inclined towards either.⁹ On the contrary, he explicitly rejected the adulterated cabbalistic writings which primarily through the Christian tradition initiated by Johannes Reuchlin (1455-1522) and Pico della Mirandola (1463-1494) had reached the hands of contemporary German authors. Thus in a letter to Franciscus Mercurius van Helmont (1614-1698) he distances himself clearly from the texts contained in the *Kabbala denudata* (1677-1684), published by Knorr von Rosenroth (1636-1689), which he characterizes as being more of heathen than Jewish origin.¹⁰

This is a distinction Leibniz makes too,¹¹ but in contrast to Spaeth he does concede that in the handed-down cabbalistic writings at least traces of the ancient Hebrew tradition are to be found.¹² Not being in personal contact with the self-styled Moses Germanus, Leibniz accepts Wachter's portrayal of him as a man who misused the Cabbala, just as Spinoza purportedly had done so beforehand.¹³ At the same time, he consistently praises Knorr von Rosenroth for his collection and in particular for his efforts to reduce the Cabbala to a kind of system.¹⁴ Admittedly, this can in part be explained by the long-standing friendship between the two men. However, even after Knorr had betrayed this friendship by publishing a German translation of his *Hypothesis physica nova* (1671) without his permission in 1680,¹⁵ Leibniz still refers to him unrestrictedly as a man of great learning, indeed as being "possibly the most able man in Europe as far as knowledge of the most secret matters of the Jews is concerned".¹⁶

The question of the extent to which received cabbalistic writings could claim to be genuine plays an important role in a discussion which took place in 1706/7 and which is likely to have given Leibniz the immediate impulse for writing his notes on Wachter's *Elucidarius cabalisticus*. The Swiss merchant Louis Bourguet (1678-1742), who at the time was working on a history of the alphabet, desired to pose questions on the Jewish heritage in China to the Jesuit missionary Joachim Bouvet (1656-1730), having read a letter of his to Leibniz on the characters of the Fohy in China, which the philosopher had published in the journal *Mémoires de Trévoux* in 1704. As Bourguet was already in correspondence with Jablonski, court preacher in Berlin and an acclaimed scholar of Hebrew, he asked him to send the letter first of all to Leibniz in order that he might judge its suitability. Jablonski duly obliged and sent Leibniz Bourguet's letter together with a list of questions on the Jews in China which he himself wanted to pose. Besides enclosing both of these with a letter of his own¹⁷ to Bouvet, Leibniz also wrote extensive comments on points raised by Bourguet, which when they eventually reached the latter's hands became the starting point of an intensive correspondence between the two men in 1709.

Just as Jablonski showed a marked interest in the Cabbala, having already in 1701 asked Leibniz to lend him manuscripts on the topic which had passed into his possession following van Helmont's death,¹⁸ so too Bourguet. Not surprisingly in view of his historical research, one of his central concerns consisted in distinguishing genuine and fictitious doctrines ascribed to the Cabbala. While recognizing that much was to be found in the cabbalistic writings which was consistent with good and sound reasoning, Bourguet felt at the same time that by being hidden in metaphysics it had been easy for it to be misused, namely first and foremost by the author of the *Ethics*.¹⁹ Indeed, he makes this quite clear in his letter to Jablonski of 12 August 1706, where he writes that "this most harmful philosopher has drawn his impious doctrines not from Descartes, but from the theology and the Cabbala of the Jews".²⁰ In all probability, he made a similar assertion also in his letter to Bouvet, since Leibniz in his comments on that letter effectively confirms Bourguet's views on the origins of Spinoza's philosophy. In this context, Leibniz refers also to Spaeth as having followed Spinoza's disreputable path and claims that this is apparent "from the German refutation of the man by Herr Wachter".²¹ Later, he goes on to claim that it is precisely through the theory of monads that Spinozism has been destroyed.²²

In his comments on Bourguet's letter to Bouvet, Leibniz raises the possibility that the misuse of the Cabbala in a Spinozistic sense might be due to the absence

of distinct philosophical concepts in the ancient Jewish tradition. But generally speaking his view is that the mixing of the genuine and the fictitious had created a body of cabbalistic teachings which from early times onwards was open to abuse by, as he writes, "half-educated men seeking to contemplate higher things".²³ As a modern example of this misuse he cites the work of Jakob Boehme (1575-1624). Elsewhere, he points to the Cabbala as only one of numerous topics in which contemporary scholars had dabbled without being properly trained and delivers at the same time an apology for the concept of acroamatic knowledge:

Among theologians irenic teachings should be considered to belong to the verbally-conveyed secrets, likewise among philologists the Cabbala, among lawyers the teachings of natural law, among physicians chemical teachings, among philosophers higher knowledge of God. But today everything is turned upside down: there are those who want to work on algebra without understanding Euclid, those who want to treat the Cabbala without understanding the sacred text, those want to determine irenic teachings by means of badly edited books...²⁴

The fate of the ancient Cabbala is for Leibniz in many ways similar to that of the teachings of the Pythagoreans, the fall of which into "empty words and superstitions" was brought about by the neglect of their true source. In this respect also there is more than a passing similarity to the fate of the Adamic language, which was traditionally regarded as being the origin of truth and peace: the perfect language before the curse of Babel which necessarily avoided conflict by guaranteeing univocacy of signification. Indeed, while some people—in particular theologians—saw Hebrew as having descended from the original language, others felt that the *lingua Adamica* might even be discoverable through the Cabbala.

Precisely for these reasons, Leibniz in the context of his work on the creation of an exact language or a genuinely philosophical script, "in which concepts are reduced to a type of alphabet of human thought", and where everything can be discovered from what is given through a type of calculus—just as arithmetical or geometrical problems can be resolved in this way—often speaks of such a language being a "true Cabbala of mystical words" or an "arithmetic of Pythagorean numbers".²⁵

This "true Cabbala" or "Cabbala of the wise"²⁶ which would express the *arcana rerum*, the secrets of nature, is at once deeply rooted in Leibniz's metaphysics. Then, on his view, there is nothing which does not submit to being grasped numerically, a notion which he regards as being the unconditionally true part of the ancient thesis that God made everything to accord with weight, measure, and num-

ber (Deum omnia pondere, mensura, numero fecisse).²⁷ Since the early days of the *Dissertatio de arte combinatoria* (1665), where the concept of relation was ascribed a key role in the application of combinatorics to the understanding of nature, and with the exception of the geometrical period of the *Theoria motus abstracti*, his position was consistently that number is a kind of metaphysical figure (quasi figura metaphysica) and that arithmetic represents a kind of statics of the universe (quaedam statica universi). In effect, the arithmological practice of the Gematrie, so beloved by popular interpreters of the Cabbala, finds here its truest expression.

It is against the background of Wachter's own interpretation of the Cabbala and of Spinoza's historical relation to it, that Leibniz's notes on the *Elucidarius cabalisticus* are to be understood. The Hannoverian philosopher does not set out to refute Spinoza, as Foucher de Careil's rather tendentious title suggests. Instead, he addresses claims made by Wachter on questions such as the origin of the Cabbala (chapter one), its diffusion (chapter two), its core teachings (chapter three) and, above all, on the agreement between the Cabbala and the philosophy of Spinoza (chapter four). Not surprisingly, it is this last topic which most attracts Leibniz's attention. In effect, he does not approach the author of the *Ethics* directly, but through the medium of Wachter. While therefore Leibniz's comments on the philosophy of Spinoza, which are largely well-known from other writings,²⁸ are indeed of secondary value, as already Friedmann correctly suggested,²⁹ his remarks on the Cabbala itself are of immense value, being perhaps his most detailed disquisition on a topic which evidently held his interest from earliest youth.

This new edition of Leibniz's notes on Wachter's *Elucidarius cabalisticus* has been prepared with two considerations in mind. Firstly, that despite the text's importance for Leibniz scholarship, it is seldom referred to, mainly because of the comparative rarity of the edition by Foucher de Careil. Secondly, despite all the credit which accrues to Foucher de Careil for making the text available in the first place, his transcription unfortunately contains serious flaws, as already Grua pointed out.³⁰ Flaws, which not seldomly put a different sense on Leibniz's words from that which he originally intended.

The editorial work has been carried out using the TUSTEP programm which since the 1970s, principally through the efforts of Heinrich Schepers, has been applied at the Leibniz-Forschungsstelle in Münster in producing the philosophical series (Ser. II and Ser. VI) of the text-critical edition of Leibniz's *Sämtliche Schriften und Briefe*, and which is now also employed in producing the edition of

Leibniz's political writings (Ser. IV) currently underway at the Editionsstelle in Potsdam. The editorial principles which have been applied are largely those used in editing the philosophical series.

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Philip Beeley
Leibniz-Forschungsstelle
Westfälische Wilhelms-Universität Münster
Rothenburg 32
48143 Münster
beeley@uni-muenster.de

Notes

¹ *Herr Peter Baylens Historisches und Critisches Wörterbuch*, translated and edited by J. C. Gottsched, 4 parts, Leipzig 1741-1744; reprint Hildesheim and New York 1974-1978.

² *Ibid*, IV, p. 271-272.

³ J. G. Wachter, *Elucidarius cabalisticus, sive reconditae Hebraeorum philosophiae brevis et succincta recensio*, [Halle], 1706; reprint (with *De primordiis Christianae religionis* and other writings) with an introduction by Winfried Schröder, Stuttgart-Bad Cannstatt 1995.

⁴ J. G. Wachter, *Der Spinozismus Im Jüdenthumb, oder die von dem heutigen Jüdenthumb und dessen Geheimen Kabbala Vergötterte Welt. An Mose Germano sonsten Johann Peter Speeth von Augsburg gebürtig Befunden und Widerlegt*, Amsterdam 1699; reprint with an introduction by Winfried Schröder, Stuttgart-Bad Cannstatt 1994.

⁵ See H. Holzhey (ed.), *Grundriß der Geschichte der Philosophie*; Die Philosophie

des 17. Jahrhunderts, vol 4, Basel 2001, p. 892; A. P. Coudert, *Leibniz and the Kabbalah*, Dordrecht, Boston etc., 1995, pp. 75-76.

⁶ Leibniz for Jablonski, March 1701 (?), *Leibnitz's Deutsche Schriften*, ed. G. E. Guhrauer, 2 vols, Berlin 1838-1840, II, p. 176.

⁷ J. G. Wachter, *Origines juris naturalis, sive de jure naturae humanae demonstrationes mathematicae*, Berlin 1704. A transcript of Leibniz's notes is contained in G. Grua's *Textes inédits*, Paris 1948, pp. 667-680.

⁸ Leibniz to Müller, 11 December 1699, A I, 17, 475.

⁹ W. Schröder, Introduction to J. G. Wachter, *Der Spinozismus Im Jüdenthumb*, pp. 15-16

¹⁰ Spaeth to van Helmont, 1696, quoted in W. Schröder, Introduction to J. G. Wachter, *Der Spinozismus Im Jüdenthumb*, p. 15 (note 30).

¹¹ See for example *De numeris characteristicis ad linguam universalem constituendam*, A VI, 4, 264: "unde nata est Cabbala quaedam vulgaris a vera longe remota".

¹² Leibniz to Müller, 11 September 1699, A I, 17, 475.

¹³ See *Théodicée*, Disc. préf. § 9, GP VI, 55; Leibniz to Jablonski (?), 15 December 1707, GP III, 546. The heavily re-worked draft of this letter is in the Niedersächsische Landesbibliothek, LBr 105, Bl. 53r-54v.

¹⁴ Leibniz to Jablonski (?), 15 December 1707, GP III, 546; Leibniz to Bourguet, 3 January 1714, GP III, 563. See also Leibniz to von Runckel, 11 February 1707, Niedersächsische Landesbibliothek, LBr 791, Bl. 3r.

¹⁵ *Ein ander vortrefflicher Tractat wider die gemeinen Irrtümer, von der Bewegung natürlicher Dinge [...]* in die reine Hochteutsche Sprach übersetzt, mit ungemeinen Anmerkungen erläutert [...] durch Christian Peganium, in Teutsch Rautner genannt, Frankfurt und Leipzig 1680.

¹⁶ Leibniz to Laloubère, 4 February 1692, Niedersächsische Landesbibliothek, LBr 519, Bl. 22v: "[...] peustestre le plus habile homme de l'Europe pour la connoissance des choses les plus cachées des juifs".

¹⁷ Leibniz to Bouvet, 13 December 1707; Niedersächsische Landesbibliothek, LBr 105, B. 43r. See also La Crose to Leibniz, 1 December 1707, Niedersächsische Landesbibliothek, LBr 517, Bl. 7v.

¹⁸ Jablonski to Leibniz, 5 March 1701, *Leibnitz's Deutsche Schriften*, II, 174.

¹⁹ Bourguet to Leibniz, 7 Juni 1709, Niedersächsische Landesbibliothek, LBr 103, Bl. 1v-2r.

²⁰ Bourguet to Jablonski, 12 August 1706, Niedersächsische Landesbibliothek, LBr 103, Bl. 91v-92r: "Hinc non dubitavi, illum perniciosissimum Philosophum,

non ex Cartesio sed ex Theologia et Cabbala Judaeorum impia sua dogmata hausisse”.

²¹ Leibniz to Jablonski (?), 15 December 1707, GP III, 545: “Verissimum est, Spinozam Cabala Hebraeorum esse abusum”. See also *Théodicée*, § 372, GP VI, 336-337.

²² Leibniz to Bourguet, December 1714, GP III, 575.

²³ Leibniz to Bourguet, 11 April 1710, GP III, 551: “Idque inprimis contingit, cum homines semidocti ad res sublimiores contemplandas admittuntur, frenaque imaginationi suae laxant”.

²⁴ Leibniz to von der Hardt, 19 October 1707, Niedersächsische Landesbibliothek, LBr 366, Bl. 320v-321r: “Apud Theologos inter arcana Acroamatica esse deberit doctrina irenica; apud philologos Cabala; apud jurisconsultos doctrina juris naturae; apud medicos chymia; apud Philosophos sublimia de deo scientia. Sed hodie invertuntur omnia: Algebram tractare volunt, qui non intelligunt Euclidem; Caballam tractant qui textum sacrum non intelligunt, irenica prestituuntur libris inconsulte editis; tirones qui non didicerunt leges receptas, volunt ad scientiam Nomotheticam provocare, et de jure naturae emendatione legum disputare; Chymia per empiricos male accipitur [...]”.

²⁵ *De arte characteristic ad perficiendas scientias ratione nitentes*, A VI, 4, 911: “Si daretur vel lingua quaedam exacta (qualem quidam Adamicam vocant) vel saltem genus scripturae vere philosophicae, qua notiones revocarentur ad alphabetum quoddam cogitationum humanarum, omnia quae ex datis ratione assequi licet, inveniri possent, quodam genere calculi, perinde ac resolvuntur problemata Arithmeticae aut Geometriae. Atque ea vera foret sive Cabbala vocabulorum mysticorum, sive Arithmetica numerorum Pythagoricorum, sive Characteristica Magorum hoc est Sapientium.” For further examples see *De organo sive arte magna cogitandi*, A VI, 4, 156; *Guilielmi Pacidii plus ultra*, A VI, 4, 675.

²⁶ *Introductio ad encyclopaediam arcanam*, A VI, 4, 527.

²⁷ *De numeris characteristicis ad linguam universalem*, A VI, 4, 263-264.

²⁸ See for example the texts contained in V. Morfino (ed.), *Spinoza contra Leibniz. Documenti di uno scontro intellettuale (1676-1678)*, Milan 1994. See also L. Stein, *Leibniz und Spinoza*, Berlin 1890, pp. 281-362.

²⁹ G. Friedmann, *Leibniz et Spinoza*, Paris 1946, pp. 140-141.

³⁰ *Textes inédits*, pp. 556-557.