Leibniz and the Consequences

An Essay on the Great European Universal Scholar

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Introduction

Like no other thinker of his time, Leibniz had a finely developed sensitivity for writing occasions: his extensive correspondence shows particularly impressively the ability to adapt to his addressee in argumentation and language. Today, one would say: to pick him up where he stands. In the main philosophical writings, we see a systematic-principled diction that is missing in the extensive popular writings. Leibniz, however, had the claim that his statements directed at a general audience must be reformulatable at any time, even in metaphysical rigour. Speaking as generally understandable as possible in order to have a broad impact must not be done at the price of a loss of consistency. With this methodological awareness as a philosophical writer and the demand to leave the ivory tower of philosophy in order to make a difference with thoughts, Leibniz sets the bar quite high, if one wants to approach him also in the form of presentation.

The reader of this book should not expect a classical introduction, that is an overview of the entire work. He will

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certainly not find an academic monographic presentation, but rather a portrait, albeit not in the form of an executed painting, but rather as a portrait drawing that aims to sketch and characterize Leibniz and his thinking with a few strokes of the pen. The aim is to show Leibniz in his many facets *and* the systematic rigour of his basic idea, in the baroque diversity of his scientific and technical interests *and* the metaphysical unity of his concept of the world. Leibniz is to be shown in the context of his time-linked, however, with the question of what became of him in the history of his influence and what he can still mean today. Leibniz *and the consequences,* in this respect, mean two things: its history of reception and its topicality.

Reception processes have their own dynamics. In the later influence of a classical author, the historical content of his work is linked to the respective present, that is he moves through the course of history in constant transformation and in constant changes of perspective. This can be illustrated for the baroque period itself by a beautiful literary example. In his novel *Das Treffen in Telgte* (*The Meeting in Telgte*), Günter Grass describes the fictitious meeting of German Baroque poets in a small town near Münster and Osnabrück to discuss the future of the German nation in parallel with the peace negotiations taking place there at the end of the Thirty Years War. A member of Group 47, which is asking itself precisely this question about the new beginning in the post-war period of the war catastrophes of the twentieth century, *quotes* the historical past of a century that was also marked by the catastrophe of a great war. It is the century of Leibniz, and Grass paints an impressive picture of this time: a poet has also at one point taken up the "sword, called it his quill" and "wanted to know to whom he should first give it in writing" (Grass 1987, 14).

So there is correspondence between epochs, and when Leibniz's 300th birthday was celebrated in 1946, the political Leibniz, oriented towards peace and the reconciliation of interests, was much more in the foreground of the ceremonial speeches than ever before and afterwards. In changed contexts of reception, the basic ideas of a classical author thus take on new connotations in the changes of the course of time: subtle, sometimes quite gross shifts in meaning often take place. Theoretically, Walter Benjamin has reflected on this central significance of *reception history.* Significantly, in a section entitled "Monadology" in the "Epistemo-Critical Preface" to his book on Baroque tragedy, he speaks of the prior history and after-effects of the works. The idea of each work is monad and "contains the image of the world" (Benjamin 1974, p. 227 f.). For our context, this means nothing less than understanding Leibniz as an expression of his world. This is exactly what we will try to do in the first and second chapters.

According to Benjamin, however, it also means that between the work as an expressive form of its time and us there is the entire history of reception and interpretation. Therefore, by reconstructing these processes of reception we must develop an awareness of how these interpretations have shaped our own image. In a book about the reception history of the Baroque poet Martin Opitz, it is said in a methodologically very enlightening way: "Works that have had a lasting effect have in turn helped to shape the sociocultural tradition that still shapes contemporary reception. From this follows the imperative instruction to follow the process of the works' transmission in order to be able to examine the determinants of their current appropriation and, if necessary, to break their power" (Garber 1976, p. 12). The second and third chapters are to be understood in this sense: We must know the history of reception as a

"consequence", at least in its main features, in order to be able to gain our own, as unobstructed as possible, relationship to Leibniz from the present. However, in understanding the history of reception, the awareness is sharpened that even the topicality of Leibniz is only a historically determined perspective on him.

In the *Arcades Project,* Benjamin has captured this necessary and inescapable perspective of our view of tradition in the apt metaphor of Libra: "Every historical insight can be visualized in the image of a pair of scales that stand up, one bowl of which is loaded with the weight of the past, the other with the insight of the present. While on the first one the facts cannot be gathered inconspicuously and not in sufficient numbers, on the second one only a few heavy, massive weights may lie" (Benjamin 1982, p. 585). We try to follow this thought in the structure of the presentation. The reconstruction of work and effect has more space, but not more weight: "Posthistory" becomes—also a motif in Benjamin's thinking reminiscent of Leibniz—the "force field" of the appropriation of a classic like Leibniz, "in that the topicality works into it" (Benjamin 1982, p. 587).

The topicality of Leibniz's thinking is the subject of the last chapter. The fact that his metaphysics starts out strictly from the individual and his perspective on the context of the whole makes it a possible starting point for the present day. For Leibniz thinks the individual substance *essentially* in relation to the others, the world, in other words, as a unit of all interactions of individual substances. Here lies the centre of the systematic basic idea, which excludes both closed systematics and arbitrariness. Leibniz's topicality thus consists, in a word, in thinking diversity and plurality without letting reality fall apart into the individual. He does not have a spelled out system, but he always thinks the fragmentary from the unity of a basic idea. Thousands of

note sheets show, in contrast to narrow metaphysical main writings, the workshop character of Leibniz's philosophy, which is articulated in baroque abundance but never loses itself in the details. It is about giving the individual, its power and the relationships in which it stands, metaphysical basic status for our concept of world.

In the history of the reception of the philosopher Leibniz, the metaphysician and the logician have been at the forefront. Leibniz's political thinking was only contingently in the foreground on his 300th birthday, so to speak, because two epochal catastrophes, the end of the Thirty Years' War at Leibniz's birth in 1646 and the end of the Second World War, coincided here. However, the topicality of the political thinker Leibniz is not contingent, but arises from the connection with his metaphysics. And if in the twentieth century the historical correspondence lay in catastrophes, the epochal affinity in the twenty-first century can be seen in the fact that he allows an order of "compossibility", a political unity of the many to think. It is precisely our time that can discover the political thinker Leibniz: for it has the problem of having to think and shape unity in the multitude *politically.* At the end of the book, we will ask to what extent Leibniz' metaphysical basic idea can offer a normative framework and thus criteria for this.

For Leibniz, this plurality does not mean arbitrariness, but is understood as an ontological characteristic of the world. Compossibility is an ontological concept that expresses what is at the same time possible, that is politically speaking it aims at an order in which the individual realizations of freedom are not mutually exclusive but can exist together. This leads him, among other things, to think beyond the classical principles of natural law to a *principle of solidarity*: not only *suum cuique tribuere* and *neminem laedere, to* give to each his own and harm no one, but also to

live with decency (*honeste vivere*) in a very specific sense: Leibniz concretizes this "unsubstantiated moral-philosophical general clause" (Holz 2013, p. 106) very concretely as *alios adiuvare*, as instruction to help others.

For Leibniz, politics is not, as in the classical political theory of modern times, the answer to the collision of claims to freedom and individual interests, but rather it starts from the very beginning from the idea of the *bonum commune*, that is from the common good or *common interests.* And in the one world in which we live today, the major problems, from the preservation of the common foundations of life to the solution of the global social question, cannot be tackled other than through criteria of balance. This idea of compensation through common interests is at the heart of Leibniz's political thinking. Another moment of great topicality is his always multilateral understanding of international politics: it is about adjustments in political constellations in the unity of a pluralistic interrelationship of forces.

Leibniz in Context: The Life of a Universal Scholar

When Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz saw the light of day in Leipzig on June 21, 1646, negotiations to end the Thirty Years' War were taking place in Münster and Osnabrück. In 1648, the Peace of Westphalia marked the end of what was probably the greatest catastrophe in German history at that time. Golo Mann described these two "Westphalian cities of Münster and Osnabrück [...], this one as the residence of the Catholics, that one of the Protestants", as "islands of security and splendid prosperity in a sea of misery" (Mann 1991, p. 220). Leibniz was born into the post-war period of this war, the most devastating war in European history: "The consequences were bad for millions of suffering, martyred human individuals. They were also bad for the collective being, called nation, in its living together and competition with other nations" (Mann 1991, p. 228).

This war left behind a Germany that was politically fragmented, economically backward and divided along religious lines and will remain a backward country in European comparison for centuries to come. In his work and

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activities, Leibniz reacted to all these basic conditions of the epoch. The "community of a multiplicity of individuals is based on the principle of peacefulness" (Holz 2013, p. 20)—Leibniz followed this maxim throughout his life as a lawyer and diplomat and as a denominationally and politically irenic man. Unity in diversity will be the basic idea of his philosophy, and as an inventor and science politician he will work tirelessly to overcome Germany's backwardness.

But the circumstances of this time also gave rise to what Helmuth Plessner so aptly called the "late nation" as a historical long-term effect. For through its fragmentation into small states, Germany was one of those countries "which have not participated in the development of the modern consciousness of the state since the seventieth century", but which "through centuries of particularism and half-solutions" will only gain its national consciousness with the political romanticism of the early nineteenth century (Plessner 1974, p. 52 f.)—with again dire consequences, because the concept of "nation" is then not bound to a political concept of the state, but to ideas of national identity. These ideas will continue to have an effect until the catastrophes of the twentieth century and will be of no small importance for the reception history of Leibniz's ideas.

In terms of the history of science and philosophy, Leibniz was born into an era in which a new scientific view of the world was formed by Galileo, Kepler and his contemporary Newton—a development to which Leibniz reacted just as much as to modern philosophy, which also emerged in the seventeenth century and is characterised in all its classical forms by the subject as point of departure:

> In its two major lines of development, that of empiricism and that of rationalism, modern philosophy is characterized by a turning towards the subject. [...] Locke's tabula rasa is

> the tabula rasa of the subject of knowledge, Descartes' meditations are the self-reflection of the individual thinking self. In Leibniz's philosophy, finally, this development culminates in the replacement of the two Cartesian substances or the one Spinozist substance by a substantiation of the individual. (Poser 2016, p. 15)

These developments of his epoch converge in Leibniz's thinking: he reacted to the challenge of the new scientific view of the world with the insight into the necessity of a unity of scientificity and metaphysical foundation of the concept of world, and to the turn of modern philosophy towards justification from the subject with a philosophical basic conception, which understands this subject not only as an individual, but at the same time as a *repraesentatio mundi*, that is an expression of the world as a whole—and thus insists that philosophy must not only be the justification of knowledge from the thinking self, but *also* the justification of a concept of world.

In the age of science, however, metaphysics, which is supposed to provide this justification, can no longer consist of the eternal certainties of the pre-scientific world view of the Middle Ages: "Philosophical systems can no longer lay claim to absolute truth. *Philosophy becomes a hypothesis*—and Leibniz did not present his system in any other way" (Holz 1992, p. 23). Leibniz thus combines the claim to scientificity with the speculative meaning of philosophy, in that metaphysical models must not contradict scientific knowledge. Both in terms of his work in the historical context of his time and his position in the scientific-philosophical situation of the epoch, Leibniz is what he himself said of the monad: a *miroir vivant,* a living mirror of his time, in which the contradictions and tendencies of modernity are presented in perspective. This makes him one of the most important personalities of the late